Kuji Furumiya
Illustration by chibi
VI
Unnamed Memory
Death of the Nameless Story

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"Oscar."
"What is it?"
"I love you."
Her love was like a ray of sunlight headed straight for him. Her single-minded nature kept him upright. He was blessed to have her in his life.
"I know."

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YEN ON

NEW YORK

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Volume 6
Kuji Furumiya
Translation by Sarah Tangney
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Character Profiles

Farsas

Oscar
The current king of the Kingdom of Farsas. Bearer of the legendary royal sword Akashia, which can neutralize magic.

Lazar
Oscar's childhood friend and a royal attendant. A young man who has been through a lot in the service of his lord.

Als
A general. The youngest general and an eminently capable officer. Oscar's sparring partner.

Kav
A mage. A very inquisitive young man who doesn't shy away from Tinasha.

Sylvia
A mage. A beautiful blond woman who is sweet and kind but a little ditzy.

Doan
A mage. A talented young man who is well-known to be next in line for the position of royal chief mage.

Tuldarr

Tinasha
A spirit sorcerer and queen of Tuldarr. After abidcating, she intends to marry Oscar.

Mila
A mystical spirit who serves Tinasha. A beautiful young girl with crimson hair and eyes.

Senn
A mystical spirit who serves Tinasha. A young man with a flippant personality.

Legis
The prince of Tuldarr. A young man with light-blond hair.

Renart
Legis's personal court mage from Tayiri.

Pamyra
An exceptional spirit sorcerer who serves Tinasha. Renart's friend.

Others

Valt
A mage who seems to know something about the magic orbs that can warp time.

Miralys
A silver-haired young girl who is secretly working with Valt to execute a mysterious plan.

Lavinia
Also known as the Witch of Silence. The person who originally cursed Oscar.

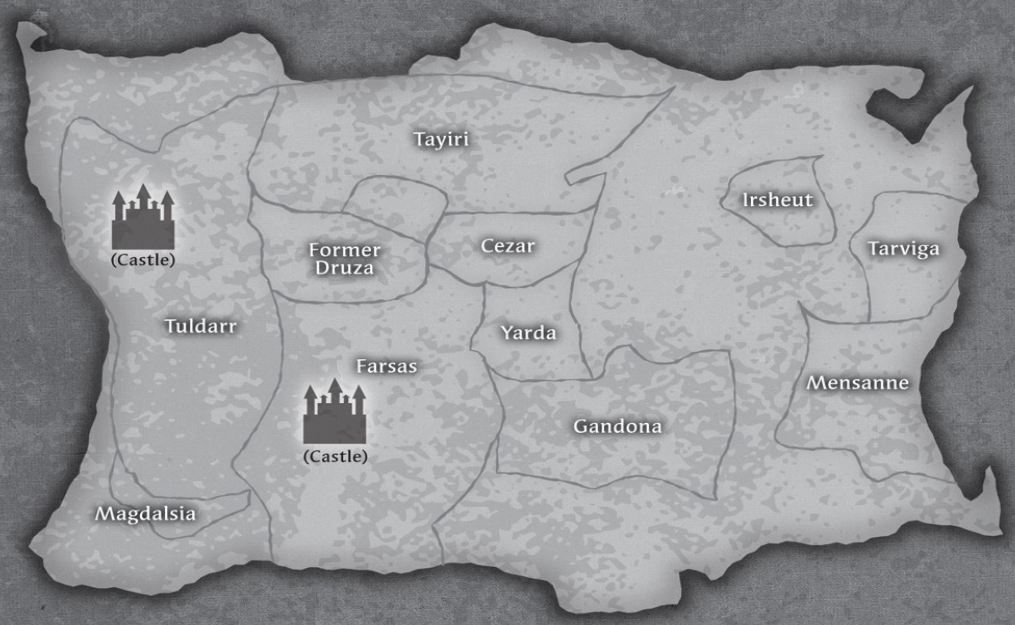
Travis
The highest-ranking demon. Capricious and unpredictable, he occasionally shows up to engage with Tinasha.

Aurelia
A girl belonging to the royal family of Gandona. After her parents' death, Travis became her guardian.

Lucrezia
Also known as the Witch of the Forbidden Forest. No one has claimed to see her for decades.

The Lands of *Unnamed Memory*

Current Year: 1654 (526 by Farsas historical reckoning)



Try as many times as your heart desires.

Until what you wish for is within your grasp.

Try it. Try, try, try.

I will gift you with the means to succeed.

1. The Song That Is No Lullaby

It is waiting.

Waiting for that one last straw to undo all the rewrites. Waiting for a sign to begin the revolution.

The world anticipated its opportunity, at the mercy of all the pins stuck into it.

※

The blood painted the white walls of the corridor red. The slain lay tragically on the ground where they fell, wearing uniform expressions of indignation and disdain. Their deaths had clearly come too swiftly and suddenly for their emotions to shift.

A girl stood amid the blood, gazing around at the dozen bodies. Although she was no older than fifteen, she was fearless, with dark hair and eyes of deepest night. Her face was as lovely as a work of art, yet it was entirely blank.

This young queen, swarmed by assassins only a moment before, smeared away the flecks of blood on her cheeks.

“I’m sure you wish that the lofty ideals of your mission had prevailed.”

The assassins were the ones who had branded her the Usurper Queen and sought to eliminate her. In a sense, their methods weren’t wrong. After all, this nation of mages was historically governed by the strongest of their ranks.

But they were woefully lacking in the power to see their plan succeed.

They had attacked the girl en masse, trusting strength in numbers, but were unable to touch a hair on her head before she dispatched them.

Recently, it had become a common occurrence. In the year since the queen’s coronation, there had been no end of those who feared her, spurned her, and sought to dethrone her. Crowned because her fellow candidate for ruler, Prince Lanak, had gone insane and died, she was a rarity even as she sat at the pinnacle of the nation.

This girl was the only ruler since the founding of the country to have full command of all twelve mystical spirits. She frowned at the piteous scene before her.

Her dark gaze fell upon the one remaining man, an older gentleman and magistrate who had served the court since the era of the previous ruler. Even after the new queen's enthronement under unprecedented circumstances, he had remained loyal, backing her up and offering thoughtful advice.

The young queen smiled at her subject. "Did you think you could kill me if you caught me by surprise and overwhelmed me?"

"I…"

"You spent so long pretending to be obedient and submissive, and now you've gone and ruined it with your shortsightedness. You should know that I never let down my guard around anyone, no matter how many years pass," she said.

"Y-you monster!" he shouted, his cry becoming an attack spell. But before he could finish weaving the magic's configuration, his head split open like a ripe fruit.

Her smile didn't falter. His body slumped backward onto the ground. Now that everyone in the vicinity was dead, some of the tension drained from Tinasha's shoulders as she sighed. "No one ever learns, do they? Honestly."

As she was about to walk away, a lady-in-waiting appeared around the next corner. "Your Majesty… Ahhhhhh!"

The lady-in-waiting shrieked at the gruesome spectacle. Tinasha cocked her head at the woman. "Yes, what is it?"

"Er, well, you have a guest. A royal of Farsas."

"I'll be right there," the queen replied.

Not long ago, a letter from Farsas had arrived stating that the king's brother wished to come study in Tuldarr.

No Oscar existed in Farsas at present; Tinasha had looked into that a while back. Still, it was the country of his future birth. Curious, Tinasha had granted permission to this one of royal lineage a few days earlier and wished to speak directly with her guest.

Tinasha was about to rush off before she stopped and turned. "Senn, could you clean this up?"

"Sure, but aren't you gonna track down their coconspirators? There's bound to be some sort of group behind all this," replied the spirit in the form of a young man, appearing in response to her summons.

The queen gave a brisk shake of her head. "That would be a never-ending task. They'll keep coming anyway."

"Got it," he replied, vanishing the pile of corpses along with the blood spatters.

Tinasha didn't stop to watch as she made for a room in which to receive guests. Waiting for her was a mild-mannered man old enough to be her

father. Out of respect for his meeting with a queen, he was not wearing a sword, but his muscular build indicated well-honed swordsmanship. The older brother of the king of Farsas, born of a different mother, had expressed a desire to study in Tuldarr so that he might bring magical culture back to his own country.

"Your Majesty, I thank you deeply for agreeing to my humble request," he stated formally.

"There's no need to stand on ceremony. We will have much to learn from you as well," Tinasha replied. Despite the hard line she took with the domestic factions who opposed her, she could not be like that with outsiders.

When she smiled at him, the man's polite demeanor cracked a little as he returned the expression. "My, what a young queen you are. My brother is young for a king, too, but he must be at least ten years your elder."

"Yes, we do have some customs that tend to surprise those not of Tuldarr. However, Farsas has Akashia, does it not?" she countered.

Just as the ruler of Tuldarr needed to be the strongest mage, the ruler of Farsas had to wield the royal sword. Historically, teenaged regents were not a rare sight; Oscar had been around twenty.

Tinasha's guest gave her a placid smile. "Are you interested in Akashia, Your Majesty? Most mages are."

"I'll admit to some curiosity. It *is* a national treasure," she answered, keeping her response vague.

A sword that could neutralize all magic certainly was a mystery. Oscar had let Tinasha touch it once, but she was unable to glean what it was made of or what enchanted it.

The man nodded. "For Tuldarr, Akashia may certainly be an object of vexation. No matter how sturdy of a barrier or defensive charm you cast, it can nullify it entirely."

Tinasha said nothing, keeping a smile on her face.

Was this a mere show of force or an open provocation?

If Farsas decided to utilize Akashia to mount aggression against Tuldarr, it would crush the Magic Empire to bits. Farsas was the one country Tuldarr needed to remain vigilant around. This was the Dark Age, and Farsas was a land of preeminent warriors. Time evidently did little to dull that prowess, as Farsas was still mighty during the era of *his* birth.

If Tinasha let herself grow blinded by personal feelings, her country would fall to pieces. She had to use whatever means were available to her, no matter what they were. A ruler had to march onward for the people, even if it meant getting dragged through the mud.

For just a moment, all sorts of thoughts rushed through Tinasha's mind.

Whether he noticed that or not, a mischievous look came over the man's face. "To commemorate your agreeing to receive me, I would like to gift Your Majesty with a tale from my travels. No one knows whether it's true or not."

“A story from your journey?”

“Yes. About three hundred years ago, the man who would go on to become the founding king of Farsas received Akashia from his future queen. At the time, Farsas was nothing more than a ragtag bunch of cast-offs and runaways from other countries. The leader of that group had a wife. The story goes that one day, she traded her own power for a sword that would not decay, and presented her husband with Akashia.”

“Traded her own power? So she was a mage?” Tinasha questioned.

If the tale were true, that would make Akashia a mage’s creation.

Noticing the queen’s interest, the man gave a wan grin. “Who can say? This is merely a fable from long ago, and no history speaks of it. It was simply used to put the children of the royal family to sleep. But according to this fairy tale, the loss of the queen’s power meant she could no longer return to where she was from. Perhaps she was a water spirit.”

“Surely not,” said Tinasha with a cynical smile upon hearing the ludicrous myth. There were many legends of blighted love between water spirits and humans, but that didn’t mean a water spirit was capable of producing Akashia.

“She was very mysterious, even compared to other accounts from that time. Oh, and the legend does give her a name, although there are no historical testimonies to support it.”

“It was never recorded?”

“There was no time for record-keeping when the country was founded. Such a young, upstart nation only wrote down the name of the first king,” the man explained.

“That sounds very much like the founding of any other nation in the Dark Age,” Tinasha commented.

She spoke the truth. Tuldarr’s own formation was a mad scramble of people with similar aspirations coming together, and many things had been left undone.

“I appreciate that acknowledgment, Your Majesty. According to legend, the lady who met our first king at the lake was named Deirdre.”

“Deirdre…?”

Tinasha spent time mulling over this fairy tale told only to the children of the royal family, a story that seemed to slip through her fingers like sand.

Yet with the upheaval and strife that soon followed, she forgot all about it.

Such was the Dark Age in the distant past.

※

“Shall we shorten your reign a little?”

“Huh?!” yelped Tinasha from a desk in her study, her voice a squeak.

She had long black hair that fell to her waist and eyes of darkest night. Her skin was white as snow. Adulthood had only perfected her rare beauty, which would undoubtedly go down in history.

She was still the queen at the zenith of the Magic Empire of Tuldarr. The Dark Age, an era of ceaseless war within and without the country, had long since passed. Tinasha had used a magic sleep to survive four hundred years into the future, where Oscar was.

With no memory of meeting her centuries ago, he had remained suspicious of the girl and treated her as a liability for a very long time. Eventually, he either grew accustomed to her or gave up and seemed to accept her. However, they were only that distant for a short time, because Tinasha's announcement at her coronation that she would only reign for a year before stepping down spurred Oscar to propose to her. She could never understand the way his mind worked, though she was very glad of his actions.

And so, as happily as any other young woman, Tinasha agreed to marry Oscar. Upon her abdication, she would leave and be wed. The thought of it made her giddy and embarrassed all at once.

Regardless, she planned to carry out her queenly duties to the end. She threw a searching look at the man sitting across the desk from her. "Shorten my reign? Have I done something careless again?"

Legis, son of Tuldarr's former king, smiled at Tinasha. From his light-blond hair to his fine features, he exuded both nobility and calm. His appearance alone gave him the aura of a prince who had stepped from the pages of a fairy tale. But at his core, he was a pragmatic and highly capable statesman. It was only because he and Tinasha helmed Tuldarr that the nation was taking the leap of total reform.

The two of them had devised a bold revolution plan that entailed switching to a two-pillar system of ruler and parliament. Tinasha and her might would dissuade any foreign powers from taking advantage of this vulnerable moment, while Legis—deeply trusted by the people—handled the negotiations with the biggest names in Tuldarr and the citizens' representatives. Tinasha, someone who'd abruptly popped up after four centuries, had almost no connections or reputation. Her only asset was her enormously powerful magic.

During her reign during the Dark Age, she had been constantly beset by assailants. While things today were much calmer, Tinasha was still very conscious of her status as a temporary queen. The political landscape and the time period were all new to her, so she didn't want to ruffle any feathers.

Legis, who would be the next king of Tuldarr, smiled faintly. "It isn't a question of anything you've done, Your Majesty. However, you've had no lack of troublesome situations ever since you took the throne."

"Y-you may have a point," Tinasha admitted. In the four months since her coronation, she had battled mysterious ruins, a forbidden curse, a child

kidnapper, and then, on top of all that, a witch and a high-ranking demoness. She couldn't deny it had been quite chaotic.

With head hung, Tinasha heard Legis's gentle tones wash over her. "And as there's no one in Tuldarr stronger than you, things may be a bit safer if you go ahead and marry into Farsas now."

"Hmm…"

Yes, no mage in Tuldarr could surpass her, but it was a different story in Farsas. Farsas had Oscar, the strongest swordsman of his generation and the bearer of the royal sword. Loath as Tinasha was to admit it, Oscar had been instrumental in resolving many of the recent troubles.

"To be completely honest," Legis began, "the king of Farsas has also reached out to me about this. He's asked if it would be possible to move up your abdication date. I believe he's worried about letting you out of his sight."

"I see." Tinasha sighed, resting her elbows on the desk, taking care not to bump her cup of tea, and burying her head in her hands. While the queen wanted to protest that Oscar had no reason to be concerned, she understood she was in no position to be making that claim. Tinasha was a spirit sorcerer whose magic would wane upon losing her chastity, which was the reason why they hadn't yet been fully intimate despite being engaged. Oscar had judged it too dangerous to leave her in a weakened state when she was separated from him.

Tinasha raised her head, raking a hand through her hair. "I really don't know what to say… Why do all these things keep happening to me?"

"Anyone else would've died immediately, and we'd have never gotten to the root of any of the crises," Legis remarked.

"That's terrifying in and of itself…"

The queen was a special breed, able to narrowly beat all the formidable enemies who had come rushing at her.

Legis smiled and nodded. "Should you wish it, we can certainly move up your abdication. You've been a great help to Tuldarr, and you're free to make any selfish demand you'd like."

The meetings and proposals to draw up the new parliamentary system were proceeding apace. She was currently shouldering a third of that work as well as her regular duties. It was an awful lot to hand off to Legis.

Still, the young man was steadfast. "Don't worry about the workload. While I've been very fortunate to have your help all this time, it's no hardship at all if you hurry your abdication along. I wish for nothing more than for you to be safe and to forge a bond with Farsas."

Despite Legis's somewhat droll tone, Tinasha crossed her arms and frowned. What he was saying was entirely correct. He was capable of handling things going forward as king.

And while Tinasha's power gave Tuldarr an advantage, it also put the nation at risk. "You may be right. And since completely unpredictable

enemies may keep showing up as long as I'm here…I suppose I'll prepare to abdicate once my wedding attire is ready. Is that all right?"

"Of course it is," Legis replied.

A fleet of artisans had begun crafting Tinasha's bridal attire a month ago; it was set to be completed in three more. Should everything go smoothly, she would vacate the throne half a year after her coronation. Her reign would be exceedingly short, but not without precedent. About five hundred years before, there was a king who ruled for a scant two months before stepping down.

Legis and Tinasha went on to review several other things. While most were resolved by immediate agreement, Legis raised an eyebrow as he made one last inquiry. "What will you do about that magic orb? Will you transport it to Farsas?"

He was referring to the magical item that could send the user backward through time, an enigmatic artifact that had the power to remake the world.

Certainly, Tinasha couldn't leave the matter as it was, yet she had no idea how best to handle it. At the very least, there was Valt to contend with, a mage who knew much more about the orb than she did. The sphere had a twin, and the pair were collectively known as Eleterria. It was Valt's mission to obtain both.

"Yes, that's a good question. Valt knows that Tuldarr and Farsas each have one. I've sealed off ours, but I also need to do the same for the Farsas orb. Or maybe I should keep it near me at all times? I'm really not sure." Tinasha sighed again.

While separated, both halves of Eleterria were kept in royal treasure holds. Valt couldn't access them directly.

Unfortunately, as long as he was targeting Tinasha and she knew where they were, he would eventually catch up to her, no matter where she hid the powerful orbs. Eleterria were too powerful to attempt to destroy, and Tinasha couldn't think of anywhere but the treasure vaults to keep them.

As her brow was deeply furrowed in thought, she happened to remember the Lake of Silence underneath Farsas Castle. "A being who was not human pulled Akashia from that lake…"

She recalled that four hundred years ago, a member of the Farsas royal family told her about Akashia's origins. She couldn't recall the details anymore, only remembering that it had something to do with the wife of the first king. The details were written in her diary, however, and she needed only to search for it. Tinasha made a mental note to do so during a spare moment. Apart from that, she continued to ponder that mysterious subterranean lake.

Investigating was an interesting notion, but she would need sheer determination to carry it out.

Unable to settle on a solution, Tinasha left the question unanswered. Legis picked up the paperwork he'd completed and stood to leave.

※

Tuldarr's neighboring country of Farsas was a well-known Great Nation that boasted martial prowess.

The king's attendant, Lazar, entered the royal study with a disgruntled expression. When Oscar glanced over at his friend and caught sight of it, he frowned. "What? What's happened?"

"Some very suspicious business has come to light, and frankly, I don't want you learning about it. But I've been tasked with informing you…"

"What's going on, then? Who wants me to know?" Oscar pressed.

Lazar looked unhappier by the second. Ultimately, he had no choice, though. He'd been instructed to apprise the king of a strictly confidential matter that had arisen. Refusing to tell Oscar simply because he didn't want to was out of the question.

"This is coming from the nobles and wealthy merchants. There is a certain brothel where a song is being sung that will kill anyone who listens to it. Almost a dozen nobles and merchants have fallen victim to it, but no one wants that made public, the location being what it is… They have made a confidential request to have it investigated," Lazar explained reluctantly.

"A song that kills anyone who hears it? Is the singer that bad?"

"No, it's not that. Rather, the nobles suspect it's a curse song. Also, there is apparently someone in a tavern singing a song that drives those who hear it to suicide. These are two different singers, and while almost all who heard the song at the brothel went on to die, only a few who heard the tavern one have committed suicide."

"A curse song…"

Oscar frowned. A while ago, he heard Tinasha sing such a tune. He was well acquainted with the power such a thing possessed to warp one's perception.

It sounds like a pain, but people have died. I can't very well do nothing.

The king couldn't deny that it also sounded interesting. He grinned as he caught a whiff of a mystery. "Guess I'm going to go hear it for myself, then."

"Are you insane?!" Lazar yelped.

"I won't know anything until I listen to it with my own ears. And it's happening right in town, so it's close by and everything."

"Now hold on just a moment! You should send someone else with you," Lazar protested.

"But what if they die? I wouldn't be able to sleep. I'll be fine going alone. I suppose I'll hit the brothel first," Oscar said.

"Would you please learn that baseless confidence is *not* a good thing?! And don't you think it's unwise to go and visit a brothel with your wedding just around the corner?"

"It won't be an issue if I don't get caught," Oscar stated dismissively.

Just as Lazar opened his mouth to object, the door to the study gave an ominous *crack* and collapsed inward. Both men turned to look.

With a terrible grating noise, the thick wooden door disintegrated into a heap and fell to the floor like a wadded-up ball of paper. A matter of seconds had reduced it to a pile of debris that was no longer reminiscent of its original shape at all. It was too strange to be believed. In the doorway stood General Als, rubbing at his temples, and a sunnily grinning Tinasha.

“Pardon the intrusion. I certainly didn’t intend to eavesdrop, but I happened to overhear *quite* the fascinating story,” she greeted sweetly, even as the temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees.

Lazar and Als fixed their gazes on the floor, clearly wishing to make a swift escape.

Oscar pinched the bridge of his nose, at a loss for how to react. Subconsciously, he checked to make sure he had Akashia near.

“May I offer to help you? Would you like me to vaporize that brothel you were just discussing? All I have to do is boil it up. It’ll be easier than making tea. Just say the word,” Tinasha said.

“Hold on now, Tinasha,” Oscar placated.

“Or maybe I should vaporize *you*, hmm?” The queen narrowed her eyes at him. Cold fury blazed within them. The windows behind Oscar started to crack.

He got up and held both hands out to Tinasha in apology. “I’m sorry. I was only joking.”

“It didn’t sound that way to me!” she cried.

“Calm down, please. Don’t blow anything up,” Oscar pleaded, opening a desk drawer and taking out a silver bracelet. Snapping it open, he tossed it to Tinasha. With a sour look on her face, she took it and put it on. In a flash, the torrent of magic that was swirling around the room vanished into thin air. Such was the power of this sealing ornament made of the same material as Akashia.

The other two men sighed with deep relief, shaking in their boots.

Anger was still distorting Tinasha’s beautiful features as she floated into the air. She fumed like a petulant child. “I wouldn’t even be here if Legis hadn’t asked me to come on business! Ugh!”

“Don’t get upset. I messed up,” Oscar said, beckoning her to come back down. As she descended sulkily to a spot behind the desk, Oscar pulled her onto his lap. He took the papers she had brought with her and flipped through them. “You’re advancing your abdication?”

“And I’m already regretting that decision,” she spat tartly.

“Don’t be like that. I’m really happy to hear it,” Oscar replied, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

However, she still turned away from him, pouty and huffy. “If our positions were reversed, you’d be pinching me so hard my cheeks would swell up.”

“Of course I would. And I’d go kill whoever the guy was.”

“All right, then I’m going to go vaporize *her*.”

“I didn’t do anything, though. Don’t blow things out of proportion. All I want to know is if curse songs can kill,” he admitted in a blatant attempt to change the subject.

Tinasha’s eyebrows raised in shock, but then she sighed with resignation. From her position on Oscar’s lap, she crossed her legs. “It’s not possible. Even I can’t do that. At most, a curse song could make a person depressed, but only if they were already prone to despair. So I very much doubt the veracity of these stories, both the one about the tavern and certainly the one about the brothel.”

“So you think there’s something else at play here?” Oscar asked.

“Someone’s just killing these people, aren’t they? Plain and simple. That’s what I would do,” Tinasha explained.

“Gotcha…”

“If you’re going to go listen to the songs, I’m coming with you. I’ve already told Legis that I’m taking today off. Oh, but in exchange, sign this.” Tinasha handed Oscar a separate set of forms from the ones pertaining to her abdication. Oscar leafed through the sheets, which described security at the Farsas and Tuldarr border.

There were no fortresses or walls on the boundary between the two countries, only a high road passing through a stretch of meadow. Watchtowers and guard stations studded the route, which had regular patrols. The gist of the documents was that Tuldarr wanted to adjust the scope of the magical barrier placed on the road for investigative purposes. This would be done to utilize fewer personnel in a more effective guard network.

Oscar checked everything over and nodded. With Tinasha still on his lap, he signed it.

Tinasha glared at her fiancé and stuck her tongue out. “You’re welcome to let me know if you’d like to take any mistresses. That happens all the time, doesn’t it?”

“You won’t vaporize them?”

“I’ll curse them so they can’t sleep unless they’re cuddling a rabbit.”

“…”

Just the idea of it was terrifying. Repressing a shiver, Oscar said, “All right, let’s go and listen together. I have a feeling you might disintegrate the entire castle if I go without you.”

“Oh, don’t worry on that account. I would only disintegrate you,” the beautiful queen stated serenely, a gracious smile on her lips.

After removing the sealing bracelet, Tinasha informed Oscar she would be leaving the paperwork with him before teleporting herself back to Tuldarr temporarily.

All three men in the study let out deep, relieved exhales. Lazar glanced over at Als, who was still frozen in the doorway. “General Als, you should have told us that Queen Tinasha was there.”

“I had only just run into her here in the hall… We weren’t trying to be sneaky. When I went to open the door, we heard your conversation,” Als explained.

The nature of said conversation was what was really to blame. Lazar and Als turned cold, reproachful eyes on their king, who only played dumb.

“Jealousy is pretty entertaining, huh?” Oscar remarked.

“*How?* Did you miss the part where she said she would *vaporize* you?!” Lazar exclaimed.

“It wasn’t entertaining at all. I thought I might die,” added Als.

Ignoring his advisers, who were both at their wit’s end, the king remarked, “We’ll have to get the door and windows repaired.”

Just about all of the king’s royal council was well aware that his bride-to-be was a jealous woman. However, as she had not displayed those tendencies since Oscar proposed, everyone had let their guard down. While Als swept up the splintered remains of the door, Lazar bemoaned the state of the windows. “I’m afraid you’ll never be able to take a mistress.”

“I don’t need one. As long as I have her, I have everything I could want,” said the king.

“If that’s how you feel, be more considerate of your actions! And words! And behavior! Sooner or later, you’re going to exhaust her affection for you!”

Oscar grinned. “No way.”

Als and Lazar could only shake their heads in disbelief, bite their tongues, and silently get back to work.

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The sky was a soft lavender hue. As twilight fell around the alleys and lanes, the man who owned the brothel went outside to open the shop. While this brothel in a western back street was far from large, it was famous for its sizable clientele. Aristocrats and wealthy merchants would disguise their identities to visit. And thanks to the rumor buzzing around town, it had five times as many guests as normal.

Glancing around, the man noticed that the establishments all around were lighting their lamps as well. For a moment, he was entranced by the almost wondrous scene before his eyes. When he looked back at his own building, he discovered a woman standing before it.

The long black hair that fell to her waist was more lustrous than silk. She had fine features, like a work of art crafted to perfection. Most captivating was her aura of mystique.

Noticing him, she turned around, and the man could not help but gasp at her beauty. She stared at him hard enough to bore holes through his skull. “Are you the owner of this place?”

“I—I am… What business brings you here?”

She was clearly not a prostitute. One glance was enough to tell that the woman was a high-class lady of some sort. Perhaps she was here to cause a scene after learning of a lover's infidelity or something of that nature.

If that was the case, things could get hairy. Her red lips parted to tell him her business, but then a man called from behind, "Tinasha, don't run ahead of me! Are you really going to vaporize it?"

"No, I'm not!" she protested.

The man's clear, refreshing voice prompted the brothel owner to turn around, only to be struck dumb. The one who approached the woman and stroked her hair was none other than the king of Farsas.

Clara and Simon, ushered onto the stage in a rush, stared in horror at the pair waiting for them. Both knew who the man was—the young ruler of Farsas. He pointed to the somewhat sullen-looking woman next to him and stated, "This is my fiancée," which meant she was the queen of the Magic Empire of Tuldarr. Apart from political might, this duo possessed unmatched power between the two of them.

Clara had at least one guess as to why they were here—the song that invited death.

But even if word of the song had made its way to the royal castle, there was no definitive proof. All she did was sing. The people who listened to her tune may have perished, but no one could prove she carried any culpability.

While Clara reassured herself of that, she was unaware that Simon, who stood behind her, was watching Tinasha with the gaze of a man resigned to his fate.

The queen peered right back at him.

Oscar and the brothel owner discussed something, seemingly arriving at an agreement. Their business concluded, Oscar turned back to the performers and his fiancée. "Well, let's hear the song, then."

"That won't be necessary," Tinasha interjected, pointing one slender finger at Simon. "He's the one with the magic. If you've got anything to say, we'd be glad to listen."

At her impolite gesture, Oscar and Clara both turned to look at Simon, who bowed his head without a word.

"What? Simon, that can't be right. Tell them!" Clara said.

"Is that true, Tinasha?" asked Oscar.

"It is. Her magic is very weak, so he's the only one who could do something… Shall I summon a spirit? High-ranking demons can tell when a human has killed someone, you know," said Tinasha, a finger pressed to her temple while her eyes remained fixed on Simon.

With his head still bowed, the man stated, "No, Your Majesty, there's no need. It is as you say—I did all of it."

"Simon?!"

"Clara, I'm sorry. Go back to your room." Simon wore a gentle smile, the sort he always did. However, there was no light in his eyes. He wasn't looking at anyone, not even her.

In the three years Clara had known him, she'd never seen him like this. She realized she had no idea who he really was.

"That was over fast," commented Oscar.

"Why do you sound disappointed?! Go and play to your heart's content if that's what you want," snapped Tinasha.

"No, I'm good," Oscar said, wrapping his arms around his angry fiancée from behind. He leaned in close to her dewy cheek. "Ooh, you've gotten soft. Once we get back, I'm going to run you through some training."

"It's been so long. I can feel the bruises already!" she moaned.

Voice dry, the king retorted, "What are you whining about when you wind up covered in blood practically every day?"

The brothel owner was bewildered as he watched them bicker. He heaved a sigh and then glanced behind at Simon, who was smiling wordlessly after soothing and sending away an utterly perplexed Clara. His placid gaze was on Tinasha, who noticed it and raised her eyebrows at him.

Simon said blandly, "I have heard that Your Majesty the Queen of Tuldarr is an exceptional and incomparable mage. Would you do me the honor of answering one question?"

"What is it?"

"Is it possible to use a curse song to kill a mass of people?"

Tinasha frowned; Oscar had asked her a similar question earlier. "It depends on the method, but it's not possible to accomplish that directly. A curse song can incite people with latent hostility in their hearts to make war, but it would be exceedingly difficult for an ordinary singer to escalate that to mass murder."

"I see," was all Simon said in response.

His arms still around Tinasha from behind, Oscar put in, "Why do you want to know?"

"Oh, I've just always been curious… Here I have Her Majesty right in front of me, and I'll likely be put to death soon anyway, so I thought I'd satisfy my curiosity before it's too late."

"Why were you interested in something like that?" Oscar pressed.

"My village was destroyed by a curse song," Simon replied, prompting the king and queen to stare at him.

Oscar said sharply, "What do you mean?"

Simon gave a wan smile. "I'm afraid this isn't a very pleasant story, but since you asked…"

He then launched into a tale of his village's demise from three years prior.

Simon's village rested in a corner of Mensanne, a Great Nation east of Gandona, Farsas's direct neighbor in that direction. The town had a long history of crafting musical instruments, and many living there were musically talented.

Simon himself specialized in the zither and in writing tunes, while his younger sister was the finest singer in the village. She had no training, but

her sheer charm and clear singing voice had suitors lining up around the block.

One day, she met a man in the woods. His sister never discussed him in detail, only claiming that he taught her a song that could kill. From then on, she began to hole herself up at home.

Concerned over her growing lack of appetite, Simon barged into his sister's room one day only to find her an emaciated husk of herself. Her eyes looked possessed, with a strange light in them.

The next day, he headed into the forest to find the man responsible for transforming his sister into someone he hardly recognized. Yet after traipsing aimlessly through the woods for half a day, he turned up nothing. Come nightfall, when he was dragging his weary legs home, he spied a terrifying sight.

His hometown was a red sea of flames. Even from a distance, he saw masses of people collapsed in the streets. No one was moving.

Over this nightmarish sight floated the faint strains of a song sung by a woman.

"And once I realized who was singing, I ran from the village. Everything about it was terrifying. I knew that no one would survive, not even my sister, who was reciting a tune I had never heard before." His story concluded, Simon closed his eyes.

Tinasha shook her head, brows knit in consternation. "But…was it really all due to your sister's curse song? I find that a little hard to imagine. Why didn't you go and make absolutely sure?"

"I'm aware I'm a coward. Even if I could revisit that day, I still wouldn't set foot in my village. What I saw was too horrific. I learned that day that nightmares could turn into reality," Simon muttered, a faint smile on his lips. Indelible terror flickered in his eyes. "After speaking with you, Your Majesty, I feel some modicum of closure. Until now, I couldn't tell anyone else about this. Thank you."

"Does that have some connection to you killing others?" asked Oscar, a cynical grin on his face. Tinasha, however, still looked baffled.

Simon's weak expression grew into a sunny smile. "No, it isn't related at all. I simply wanted to repay a bit of gratitude to Clara for saving me."

"Killing people is repaying gratitude?" Tinasha questioned.

"Yes. As word spread of a singer who could bring death, customers flocked to her with the express goal of hearing her sing. Curiosity is a strange beast. Once I got involved, her customers doubled," Simon explained, making no attempt to disguise his disdain for the victims. That made Tinasha openly uncomfortable, even as she elbowed Oscar in the stomach warningly. Oscar maintained his composure, however.

Abruptly, Simon's face twisted. "Besides, none of her clients ever saw her as a person. Swanning about all arrogantly, they treated her like an insect. Someone like you wouldn't know what that's like, would you?"

After a pause, Tinasha responded. "You're right. I wouldn't."

She knew there were limits to one's imagination. No matter how she sympathized or envisioned what it must be like, it would only come off as trite and clichéd.

"But from Clara's view, wouldn't it make her much happier to have you with her forever as opposed to the deaths of those she hated at the cost of losing you to execution?"

Tinasha wished to say as much, but she held back. Instead, she looked up at Oscar. "Well, it's up to you now."

"Thanks for the help. I'll have the soldiers take him in," he replied.

Tinasha glanced at Simon, whose expression had relaxed, looking placid again.

The sight of it made some manner of indescribable bile rise in her throat, and she bit her lip.

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It was growing dark outside. Night would soon fall completely.

Als was making his way down a corridor in Farsas Castle when he caught sight of Doan, Sylvia, and some other mages huddled by a courtyard-facing window. They were staring down at a patch of ground that was lit up bright as day for some reason.

"What are you doing?" Als asked.

"Oh, His Majesty is playing with Queen Tinasha," a mage answered.

"Playing?" Als repeated skeptically. When he looked closer, he found that the king of Farsas and his fiancée were sparring underneath a magic light. While Tinasha was sweaty as she thrust her sword at Oscar, the king handled her easily.

"I told you, that's too high! Lower it!" Tinasha cried.

"Nope. You've gotta compromise," responded Oscar.

The metallic sound of swords clashing filled the air. As they kept shouting about "high" and "normal," Als grew increasingly unable to make sense of their conversation. "What are they talking about?"

"They're negotiating grain taxes."

"Wow…"

From an outsider's perspective, Oscar was taking a very underhanded route. The discrepancy in their physiques and skill was clearly taking its toll on Tinasha, and Oscar buffeted her with questions.

Still, she was not one to back down. "If you don't lower it, I'm going to wreak some havoc around here!"

"That's a threat, you know."

"Grrrr!" Tinasha lunged forward and swept her sword up sharply.

But Oscar parried it away easily and brought his practice sword down on her neck, stopping it just before it made contact. "I suppose we can set it at seventy percent. In exchange, I want you to lower taxes on our textiles."

“Fine,” Tinasha agreed after some quick mental calculations. Neither proposal would put Tuldarr at a disadvantage. Good weather had blessed her country with a bountiful grain harvest this year, so this was perfect.

Crouching, she inhaled deeply to steady her breathing. “Did you do that on purpose? Bringing up your little proposal once I was exhausted?”

“Of course I did. Waiting until your opponent’s sense of judgment is dulled is lesson one in negotiations,” Oscar stated smugly.

“I will *throttle* you…”

Tinasha stood, keeping her hands on her knees. She had taken hits on both arms and her back, which were likely to bloom into bruises; she healed them before they could.

Oscar took her sword from her. “Your moves have gotten better. Maybe it’s all the combat experience?”

“What? Do you really think so? I’m actually pretty thrilled to hear that.” Tinasha knew that all the battling had honed her magical instincts to a fine point, but she had no clear assessment of her swordsmanship.

Praise from her very first combat instructor made her break into a happy grin. Oscar ruffled her hair like she was a little kid. “We should get back. I’ll get a change of clothes ready for you, so go and wash off all that sweat.”

“Okay,” Tinasha sang, trotting off.

Oscar glanced up and met Als’s gaze through the window. A devilish smirk was visible on his face.

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“What happened to Simon after his arrest?” asked Tinasha while combing out her wet hair after using the bath in Oscar’s chambers. She was freshly changed into a white dress of light silk.

Oscar was sitting on the bed, his knee propped up and his chin resting on it as he gazed at her. The fine silk clung to the lines of her soft curves, sending a frisson of arousal through him.

Tinasha looked back from drying her hair. “Oscar? Are you listening?”

“Huh? Oh, he was executed after thorough interrogation. The girl got a stern reprimand.”

“I see,” she said, carding her fingers through her hair. Any remaining damp strands dried instantly at her touch. Once her hair was completely dry, she picked up her comb again and came to sit next to Oscar as she brushed her long tresses. “It was just such an odd story he told… I really am suspicious of the man his sister met in the woods.”

“Is that still on your mind? What if he was lying?”

“It didn’t seem that way,” she replied. Oscar didn’t say anything, but he felt the same.

Simon’s story was likely true, and that incident had changed the course of his life.

Tinasha went on. “Witnessing the destruction of his village and abandoning his sister must have left deep psychological scars. As a result, he became fascinated with the idea of a curse song. I heard the one he made, and it was well done. Creating a melody that can be used as the base for a curse song might be within the realm of genius.”

“It was a nasty story, and he was a strange little man,” Oscar remarked.

There was no way of knowing just how significantly Simon’s past had traumatized him. It hardly justified his murders, however. Tinasha vanished her comb and stroked her jaw. “It’s too disturbing to ignore. An entire village was destroyed. Did that ever happen in Farsas? Villages left in ruins, cause unknown?”

Briefly, Oscar cast through his memory of the past decade. “I guess there’s one case like that. I think it was two years ago… Everyone in a settlement near the border perished.”

“What did they die of?” Tinasha asked.

“All kinds of causes. Two or three days had passed by the time anyone realized it. According to reports, some had burned to death, while there were also signs of people fighting with one another. There were no survivors, no one to give testimony. It was left unsolved.”

“Two years ago… Simon said his village was destroyed three years ago. I’d like to check up on records across the mainland.”

“Oh? Do you have some clue what it might be?” Oscar inquired, winding his fingers through Tinasha’s still-warm hair and caressing her nape.

Tinasha jolted a little out of ticklishness, but the pensive look on her face remained. “Nothing specific, but something about this is jogging my memory. After all, a curse song is capable of subliminal provocation.”

“Which could make friends fight one another or drive people to arson?”

“Hmm. In theory that *is* possible, but only a mage of my caliber could incite such widespread effects across an entire village all at once.”

Oscar frowned. Tinasha’s words suggested she was likely the only person capable of doing something like that. And in that case, the source of these incidents couldn’t be a curse song.

Tinasha hugged her knees to her chest. “But if it were an ordinary hex instead of a curse song, that would dramatically expand the list of possible culprits. Still, only a very powerful mage could pull it off. And unless we’re talking about an eccentric who specializes *only* in hexes, a mage that good would find it easier to simply attack a village using regular means.”

“Do you think a mage destroyed those towns?” Oscar asked.

“I strongly suspect so. I believe it’s all linked to the man Simon’s sister encountered in the forest, though I don’t know how direct of a hand he had.” Tinasha sighed. Tilting her head to one side, she peered up at Oscar. “So that’s what we know. I’d like to do some research into this.”

“You really do love poking your nose in some weird places,” Oscar commented dryly.

“Hmph. It’s who I am.”

“I suppose one of the ruined settlements was in Farsas. If the same person’s responsible for both tragedies, that needs to be dealt with. Ask me for any help you want.”

Tinasha grinned, dimpling like a child. “Thank you.”

She was a slippery woman, mercurial and unpredictable. She could be the perfect coolheaded queen and then morph into a pure, innocent girl.

Oscar smiled fondly as his fiancée’s more childish side came out. “I really can’t take my eyes off you for one second.”

“Hmph. So you asked Legis to talk to me about speeding up my abdication?”

“I did indeed. I told him things are so dangerous that I’d like to have you with me now. I think it was pretty effective, since I also told him about you fighting a witch and an all-powerful demon.”

“And after I did my best to hide that part from him!” she cried.

“Don’t do things like that!” he retorted, even as he pulled her close to him and pressed a kiss to her glossy black hair. “Come to me now.”

Once you do, I’ll protect you with everything I have. I’ll drive back any enemy that comes knocking at our door.

Tinasha had traveled from four hundred years in the past, all to meet him. But because she was queen, she refused to abandon her country. She was trying to have it all.

However, it was long past the age when one supreme ruler alone would sustain a nation.

She was soft in his arms, burning like a warm lamp. The atmosphere grew hazy and heavy, inexpressible emotions hanging thick in the air.

There was no sound at all to be heard. The only thing that told them this moment was real was the warmth of their bodies.

Tinasha blew out a hot breath. “About what we were discussing this afternoon…”

“Which was?” Oscar asked.

Tinasha looked guilty. “The whole mistress thing… I mean, you’re not cursed anymore, so you can do what you want. It’s your right and all.”

When he heard that, Oscar restrained himself from bursting into laughter. Tinasha sounded very serious. She was probably feeling guilty about losing her temper earlier.

However, there was no need for her to worry about that. She was the only person Oscar had ever wanted to be with, even if it meant dealing with the problems that came along with her.

She was the type of person who loved strongly and did not expect to receive that same love back. He could show her the tiniest bit of affection, and she would swoon like a maiden and feel that was enough for her.

Oscar’s feelings for her ran deeper than that, though. She was his one and only; he had decided to spend his life by her side. Not once had he considered taking other consorts.

“I don’t need mistresses. Don’t worry about it,” Oscar assured her.

“Are you sure?”

“Have some more confidence in yourself. It just sounds like you hate other women.”

“Well… Confidence is easier said than done.”

“Personally, I find who you are as a person to be much more interesting than your looks or your magic. Although both are a bit too conspicuous already, more than capable of inspiring envy on their own.”

“I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean… Most people don’t get to know me as a person, and for a good reason. I have enough power to rival a witch, after all. It would be ludicrous of me to expect anyone to look past that.”

“I’m not looking past it. You’re you because of it,” Oscar said.

The overly immense power she had always lived with was a large portion of what made Tinasha. Yet it was still only one part. So to her, she didn’t see the need to worry about it.

Oscar caught hold of Tinasha’s downturned face, tilting her chin up. He gazed searchingly into her dark eyes. “Anyway, I have a little favor to ask.”

“What is it?”

“I want you to put a transportation array in here connecting my rooms to yours.”

“What? I can, of course, but why?”

“So I can come pick on you every day.”

“Absolutely not!” she shouted, tumbling off his lap and onto the bed. Her limbs splayed out from the center of the wide bed.

Oscar scooted over to sit next to Tinasha and pinched her puffed-up cheeks. “Please?”

“Ouch! Is that the sort of attitude you have when asking someone a favor?!” Tinasha flailed wildly for a bit before laying her head in his lap. “I mean, all you have to do is call for me, and I’ll be there. Stop trying to bully me whenever you want.”

“But there might come a time when I can’t just call for you. If something happens to me, you’ll know because of the protective charm you have on me, but I don’t have anything like that to tell me when you’re in trouble,” Oscar pointed out.

Tinasha had placed a barrier on Oscar that warded off all magic attacks. If any spells made contact with it, she would know immediately. On the other hand, a non-mage like Oscar had no way of knowing if anything had happened to Tinasha. He’d only learned of her recent battle against a demoness after the fact.

“It’s all well and good if nothing happens, but you have a *lot* of enemies. It’s perfectly natural for me to fear you’re tangled up in something. Let me at least just check in on you once a day.”

“Oscar…”

Tinasha looked remorseful. She *was* aware that she’d been worrying Oscar. While the king understood the mindset of feeling strong enough to

take care of things alone, his fiancée tended to take herself to the brink of death, confident she would win in the end and make it worth it. Such were the differences in their personalities and the eras they had grown up in, but that was no reason to let her continue that way. They were going to be married.

Curling in on herself, Tinasha said, “I’m sorry. I guess I don’t really know how to rely on people.”

“Well, I don’t mind if you think of it as indulging me. I’ll be very mad at you if you die.”

“I understand,” the queen replied, rising and glancing around until she found an out-of-the-way spot in a corner of his bedroom.

“Should I make it one-way? Two-way?” she asked.

“Two-way. I need to be able to get back,” Oscar answered after deciding.

“Okay, and are you the only one in the castle who needs to give permission for this?”

“Of course,” he said.

Tinasha smiled, nodded, and held up her hand. In a clear tone, she spoke an incantation. As it ended, a transportation array appeared on the floor. She stood on tiptoe to inspect it and then turned back to Oscar. “It’s done. It will activate once you step inside.”

“Oh yeah? Thanks.”

“I’m the one who should be thanking you,” she corrected with a tight smile.

Flopping back onto the bed, Tinasha rolled to her stomach and kicked her feet back and forth in the air.

Looking at her in such an obviously good mood, Oscar remembered something. “Don’t you need to be getting back?”

“Oh! I don’t have anything on my schedule tomorrow morning, so I thought I’d stay here.”

“Got it. You really are a defenseless little kid…”

Even prior to their engagement, Tinasha had never displayed much shame around Oscar, but that was because she thought he didn’t have any interest in her as a woman. He’d assumed that his proposal would show her that wasn’t the case, and she would change her behavior. Although Tinasha did reveal a cuter side now, blushing and growing flustered around Oscar, she still left herself quite vulnerable. At night, she would turn up and fall asleep next to him, then refuse to get out of bed in the morning.

While it occasionally felt as though he were being demanded to exhibit superhuman restraint, Oscar himself had chosen to remain on the safe side. He knew that the loss of Tinasha’s chastity would weaken her powers, which was why they lived apart. Seeing as Tinasha said she was fine with that, he had to just resign himself to it. It was more important to give her time to relax, away from her duties.

“Well, having our rooms connected affords us a bit more flexibility, so maybe I’ll rethink that.”

“Rethink what?” Tinasha inquired.

“Just how far I can test the limits of my patience,” Oscar grumbled.

“Hmm? Good luck with that,” she replied, not understanding what he meant, and Oscar burst out laughing.

He lay down next to her and cuddled her slender frame. She burrowed her head in close to him like a cat, then abruptly peered up. “Oh right. Oscar, do you know the story of the first queen of Farsas?”

“What? Where’d that come from? No, I don’t know it.”

“Really? You didn’t hear about it as a fairy tale that only the royal family gets to listen to?”

“I…don’t remember that. I have no memory of a story like that,” Oscar replied. What had brought this on?

Tinasha’s face turned pensive. “Maybe it’s been lost in the past four centuries, then. I heard about that story a long time ago and just happened to remember it the other day. The first queen was the one to give Akashia to the founding king.”

“First I’m hearing of it. All I know about Akashia is that someone who wasn’t human fished it up from the Lake of Silence.”

“Exactly, which I didn’t know until you told me. What I originally heard was that the first queen may have been a water spirit.”

“Who told you all this?” Oscar questioned. If it was a story told only to the royal family, then she had to have heard it from a Farsasian royal. Farsas and Tuldarr were neighbors, providing plenty of opportunities for such chats, but he wanted to know who would bring up such a casual topic of conversation.

Tinasha’s long eyelashes fluttered with sleepiness. “Someone who came to study in Tuldarr. After that, the war with Tayiri happened and I forgot all about it. I think I had to send that person home early.”

“Man or woman?”

“Man. Why is that important?”

“Because we have a lot of weirdos in our family tree.”

“It’s been like that since the Dark Age, huh?” Tinasha remarked dryly.

Tinasha buried her face in Oscar’s chest and let out a little yawn. He would be really pushing her if he kept the conversation going. Stroking her hair, he said, “Go to sleep. If you don’t wake up tomorrow morning, I’m dumping you over to your own room.”

“I’ll wake up…”

With a little sigh, Tinasha shut her eyes. Closed, they looked like two seashells; her long eyelashes cast shadows on her porcelain cheeks, painting an enchanting picture.

Her beauty was like a miracle. But the real marvel was that she had appeared in this era.

Their destiny was one born of coincidence and fierce dedication all knotted together. It was extremely precarious, which was why Oscar wouldn’t trade it for the world. He had once given up on such feelings only

to choose them of his own volition. Relinquishing them again would be unthinkable.

He leaned close and pressed a kiss to her eyelid. She giggled. “Oscar.”

“What is it?”

“I love you.”

Her love was like a ray of sunlight headed straight for him. Her single-minded nature kept him upright. He was blessed to have her in his life.

He dropped a kiss onto the petals of her lips. “I know.”

On his life and on his sword, the king swore he would keep anyone from bringing her harm and would always be there to grab her hand when she was struggling.

2. Monochromatic Flowers

Of the twelve mystical spirits Tinasha commanded, she always had three summoned. All twelve took turns as these watch guards, stationed on the northeastern border with Tayiri, in the capital, and on the southern border, respectively. Usually, any spirit not serving as a watch guard would only appear when summoned by the queen. There were some exceptions like Mira and Lilia, who remained near Tinasha unless called away by duty, as well as Karr, who came as an adviser, but that was far from the norm.

As a rule, high-ranking demons carried no interest in humans, so the spirits would not manifest without an order from their master. It was an unspoken boundary line between them and mortals.

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Ever since Tinasha first heard of the strange case of villages falling into ruin for no discernible reason, she had taken to researching it whenever she had a spare moment between royal duties.

That said, her research did not consist of consulting other countries' records; she couldn't gain unfettered access to those accounts simply because she was curious. Instead, it was more along the lines of dispatching her spirits and diplomatic advisers to ask around for information in cities and towns.

Many nations besides Farsas owed a debt of gratitude to Tinasha for saving them, including Yarda, Cezar, and Former Druza. All graciously acquiesced to her somewhat personal request.

Once all the information she collected was assembled, a hazy picture emerged.

"So the earliest case happened seven years ago. If it really is all the work of the same person, they're pretty clever. Moving from country to country, destroying entire villages without leaving a shred of evidence… We're looking at nine sites altogether. Had those all happened in the same country, it would've been too conspicuous, but they were all in different nations in locations and dates that were too disparate to be noticed,"

Tinasha said to Pamyra, who had answered the queen's summons for help sorting her royal paperwork.

As Pamyra looked over the investigative report, she blanched. "Did the same person really do all of this? There are so many victims…"

"Hmm. My instinct tells me it's not the same person, but there's really not enough evidence to say for sure."

Across the nine villages, a little over two thousand people had died. If Tinasha's information was correct, this was a major historic incident. Curiously, not one of the victim villages belonged to Tuldarr.

Pamyra was puzzled. "Why didn't they come to Tuldarr? Despite how big the country is, we don't have that many settlements. If something happened to one, it would take a while before news reached the neighboring communities. At a glance, it seems like an easy target."

"I think it's because the person doing this is a mage. No matter how remote the village, a place in Tuldarr is likely to have a dozen or so mages. Whoever's behind this wouldn't want to face them," Tinasha surmised.

"Ooh, I see…"

Cursing another mage required much more effort than doing it to an ordinary person. A mage would also be able to escape easily using teleportation. Escapees who could give testimony defeated the purpose of destroying an entire village. Someone carefully evading detection wouldn't risk targeting Tuldarr.

Tinasha signed some documents Pamyra brought to her and stated, "The real problem we have to deal with now is how to catch them."

With her chin in her hands as she pondered the quandary, the queen glanced over and noticed the time. She called back the spirit placed at the northeastern border. "Itz, thank you. Let Sylpha relieve you."

Her magic-infused words reached the ears of the distant spirit. In reply, an entity in the form of an old man appeared. Itz bowed deeply. "There have been no changes at the border."

"Good," Tinasha responded. The northeastern border faced Tayiri, the country that abhorred magic. To the east were Farsas and Former Druza, while the south road led to the breadbasket nation of Magdalsia. Only Tayiri harbored antipathy toward Tuldarr.

And while Tuldarr did maintain constant vigilance against Tayiri, it didn't seem like Tayiri had any desire to go picking fights with Tuldarr. The report that there was nothing out of the ordinary relieved Tinasha.

While she had Itz there, she asked him, "By the way, have you ever seen any destroyed villages?"

"Ah yes, that mystery. Fortunately, I have never seen any, so I cannot offer you any clues," he answered.

"I thought so."

"However, I did catch sight of an unusual personage in a town near the border. Perhaps this individual may provide some help in solving your case," Itz suggested.

“An unusual personage?” Tinasha frowned, having no idea who that might be.

In a gentle tone, Itz continued. “Yes, indeed. An unerring fortune-teller.”

Itz opened a teleportation portal for Tinasha that led to a town on the edge of Tuldarr that was home to a grand waterfall. In any other country, it would’ve been inconveniently located, as far as it was from the main high road. However, Tuldarr’s network of teleportation arrays helped this location flourish as a tourism site.

As Tinasha made her way down the main avenue, her curious gaze roved all over the bustling stalls and stands lining the street. “Reading about this place and coming here in person are two totally different experiences. There are many more people than I imagined.”

“People say that all born in Tuldarr must come and see this waterfall at least once in their lives,” Pamyra remarked with a smile, here to accompany her queen.

Both during her life in the Dark Age and her life now, Tinasha spent almost all her time in castles or on battlefields. She had never toured any of her own nation’s sightseeing locales. Even this break was wedged into her tight schedule. She didn’t have time to go view the waterfall, but she would know that freedom once she was married. Itz had given her the transportation coordinates so that she could return with Oscar someday.

Facing the spirit, the queen inquired, “So what’s this unerring fortune-telling?”

Almost every form of fortune-telling was unreliable. A long time ago, some mages moonlighted as clairvoyants, but no magic spell could divine the future. It would be pure conjecture, nothing more.

Naturally, Itz knew that as well. He answered his master’s question with a smile. “It’s most likely a supernatural ability, like precognition or fate-seeing.”

“Ah, I see,” said Tinasha. It was exceedingly rare, but some people in the world possessed extraordinary powers that had nothing to do with magic. Aurelia, a girl Tinasha had met recently, had the ability to see into people’s pasts. This fortune-teller must have carried the exact opposite talent.

Itz pointed farther down the road. “That’s her.”

Tinasha’s eyes narrowed a fraction. A girl sat behind a small table set up at the opening of an alleyway. Her face was covered with a veil, but wavy silver hair spilled from the edges of it. A garland of white flowers sat atop the table, glowing under the sun.

Tinasha’s face screwed up in a grimace. “What is that magic…?”

“Your Majesty?”

“She’s suppressing her power, but it’s not an ordinary amount. It might be as much as I have.”

“What?!” yelped Pamyra despite herself, then hurriedly clapped a hand over her mouth. Fortunately, the crowd around them didn’t seem bothered.

Likely, Itz had cast an awareness-blocking spell over the throng, not wanting anyone to recognize the queen and cause a fuss.

Itz chose his words carefully. “This is an acquaintance of mine from a very long time ago, though I don’t believe she remembers me. As you can see, she is a powerful mage, but she is not someone who would bring harm to others. She does not get deeply involved in anything; she simply passes the time with amusements like this.”

There were layers of hidden meanings implicit in the spirit’s remark, but none of it was strictly a lie. Tinasha and Itz had a master and servant relationship. He could not speak falsely in a way that might put his master at a disadvantage, nor was he an incredibly kind sort by nature.

“If she has that much magic and you’ve known her for a long time, she must be someone who once held great sway in Tuldarr. I’m curious to know why someone like that doesn’t appear in any historical records and is still alive today, but I will take your word for it,” said Tinasha.

“You are very perceptive and generous, my lady,” Itz replied.

While the origins of Farsas’s royal sword were a mystery, the Magic Empire of Tuldarr predated Farsas by two hundred years. One or two strange stories were bound to be hiding in its history. Tinasha herself was an unusual character who had slept for four centuries. She had no right to judge others.

Tinasha approached the fortune-teller’s table and examined the girl on the other side. All she could see under the veil was a pair of blue eyes peering up at her and a young-looking face.

“Would you like to have your fortune told?” the girl inquired.

“Please,” Tinasha answered, pulling out a stool and sitting down.

Now that she viewed the girl from head-on, Tinasha noticed she had a face as pretty as a porcelain doll’s. Her skin was as white as fresh, untrodden mountain snow. Her straight nose and tiny lips were as if painted on by the most delicate brush, crafting a picture of beauty.

However, her eyes, like two crystal balls, weren’t looking at Tinasha. They were focused on something else, much farther away.

It felt like those eyes would suck Tinasha in if she peered into them for too long. Thus, the queen got straight to the point. “I’m looking into something. Several villages have been destroyed by a mage. However, I don’t know where to start looking. Do you have any clues?”

Tinasha didn’t expect any sort of immediate answer. Supernatural abilities often did not work on command.

Yet the fortune-teller girl replied instantly. “It won’t be long before they come to you.”

“What? Really?”

If someone who could see the future claimed as much, then Tinasha could probably begin preparing. She cocked her head inquiringly, but the girl only nodded.

From his position standing next to Tinasha, Itz commented, “Her fortunes are absolute, although it’s possible to change your fate once you’ve heard the prediction.”

“Hmm, I guess that means I should continue my investigation,” Tinasha mused. She hadn’t gained any direct clues, but perhaps that was fine.

Still feeling confused, Tinasha placed a large stack of coins on the table. “Thank you. That was helpful.”

At the very least, she’d learned that this strange case wouldn’t remain unsolved. It was also past time to return to the castle. Itz and Pamyra bowed to the girl.

As Tinasha was about to draw up a teleportation portal, the girl muttered, “So many shards are sticking into you.”

“What?”

Was this also part of her ability to see the future?

Eyes the color of a frozen lake watched Tinasha, her own bemused reflection shining within them.

“The world is waiting for a revolution.”

Her remark had the ring of something heard in a sea of chaos, a sound that wouldn’t remain in the memory.

“I feel like I’ve received a vaguely ominous premonition about my future,” Tinasha grumbled, once back in her royal study as she picked up a sheaf of papers.

Pamyra had already moved on to other work, and Itz had been dismissed to rest.

The mysterious divination from the fortune-teller weighed on her mind. When pressed for an explanation, the girl had replied, “I can only see it. I can’t comprehend it.”

Tinasha couldn’t seem to relax. What made her most uneasy was the feeling that she’d heard a similar claim before.

“Wasn’t…that…?”

It wasn’t four hundred years ago. It had been much more recently.

Everything was touching her. She understood everything. About the world, about herself.

Just like trying to recall a dream, it was beyond Tinasha’s grasp, although she felt it tickling the tips of her fingers. She had felt something identical, and she later told Sylvia about it. *“I was in a strange place where I understood everything.”*

“Oh. That was when Simila consumed me.”

It was no wonder Tinasha couldn’t remember what she’d glimpsed within Simila, the snake that appeared from the lowest plane of existence. Human senses didn’t work on other planes. No matter what she learned there, she couldn’t take the memory out with her.

“The mystery deepens…”

With no hope of an answer, Tinasha had no choice but to let it go. The nature of war meant that it was not uncommon for broken shards to be stuck into her. And if that happened, all she had to do was heal herself.

As Tinasha concluded her thoughts there, Legis entered the study. “You’re back, Your Majesty. How was the waterfall?”

“I didn’t see it. I certainly couldn’t shirk my duties to go sightseeing.”

“It’s a beautiful place. I went once when I was a boy. I believe that town didn’t exist at the time of your reign four hundred years ago.”

“No, it didn’t. I hadn’t heard of any waterfall until waking in this era,” she replied.

A lot could happen in several centuries. So much was new to her. If this was what it was like to cross through time, how vast was everything that fortune-teller girl witnessed?

Musing on that notion, Tinasha accepted a stack of documents from Legis. She flipped through all of them, from most urgent to least, until finally she paused on one page. “Tris is going back to visit her hometown. She’s from Tayiri, huh?”

Tris, the girl who assisted in resolving the kidnappings at the Academy of Magic, had since become a court mage. She was requesting approval for her visit home, as all those who served the court of Tuldarr needed to file for advance permission before entering Tayiri. Tinasha and many others had assumed Tris hailed from the town that was home to the Academy of Magic, but it turned out she was from Tayiri.

Legis peered over at the national departure register and gave a wan smile. “Her family lives in Tayiri, while she’s living with a relative in Tuldarr. I heard that on her visit last year, Tayiri soldiers discovered her and chased her around.”

“Oh… And she became a court mage this year. If she’s ever caught, we’ll be in for a diplomatic incident,” said Tinasha.

Tayiri ostracized mages. In some cases, unfortunate children born with magic were killed. Most of those children ended up coming to Tuldarr, but each one’s individual circumstances determined whether they would move alone or with their families.

It would be quite the sticky situation if a Tuldarr court mage were to get arrested in Tayiri. Tris was still young, so Tinasha felt obligated to do what she could to help.

“I think I’ll arrange for an escort for her trip. We’ve only just begun the crystal excavations in Cezar, and I don’t want to provoke Tayiri. Another war may wipe Tayiri off the map.”

The Tuldarr army, as commanded by Tinasha, had forced Tayiri to yield four hundred years before, after it had attacked first, but that was no mean feat. She wanted to avoid war at any cost.

Although Tinasha’s remark had been a joke, Legis’s expression turned grave, and he bowed. “I apologize for the trouble. Thank you for doing this.”

“Sure,” Tinasha replied, regretting how she’d thought Legis would laugh off her comment. That was a little unscrupulous of her. While reflecting upon that, she summoned one of her spirits.

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“I’ve been a spirit of Tuldarr for a long time now, but I gotta tell ya, this is the first menial task I’ve been assigned.”

“Don’t say that name here! And don’t talk about being a spirit, either!” chided the girl.

The black-haired, black-eyed man simply shrugged. The girl was Tris, a court mage, while the spirit was Eir, one of the twelve who served the Queen of Tuldarr. Eir knew Tris from the Academy of Magic incident, which was why Tinasha assigned him to accompany the girl on her trip.

After leaving Tuldarr together, the two of them were presently floating in the skies above western Tayiri, where Tris’s hometown was.

“I’ve only been dragged into this because you had to go and get caught by Tayiri soldiers last year,” Eir pointed out.

“Y-you be quiet… There was just a bit of a holdup at the border, that’s all,” Tris muttered.

It was impossible for Tinasha to send them directly into Tris’s hometown, as the girl didn’t know the coordinates because she couldn’t teleport. Eir had no choice but to teleport them nearby. The rest of the journey would have to be made via flight through the twilit sky.

At last, the lights of a town came into view far below. When Eir threw the girl a sidelong glance, she gave a relieved-looking nod. They descended from the air and landed in a nearby forest.

“I have an errand to run for Lady Tinasha in Gandona, so I’m headed there now. When are you going back to Tuldarr?” Eir questioned.

“I don’t need you to escort me back! I can get back on my own!” Tris protested.

“What? But I was ordered to come and collect you for the return trip. Well, I guess if you run into any trouble, you can contact Tuldarr and have Lady Tinasha call for me. You *can* use magical telepathy, can’t you?”

“I—I can…”

“Okay, then see you.” After an uninterested farewell, Ein drew up a teleportation spell.

Tris hurried to give him a wave. “Um… Thank you.”

“It’s fine. Be careful,” he replied. That was all he had to say before he vanished. Free of her inscrutable companion, Tris sighed out all her pent-up frustration before setting off at a run toward her family home.

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The night air in Tuldarr was cool.

Tinasha had the windows in her bedroom open as she scanned some papers, and she found herself shivering. Winter was a while off yet, but she was freezing in her light nightgown. Setting the documents down, she went to close the window.

As she was leaning out the window, a sudden and mysterious sense of unease struck her.

"Hmm…?"

There was a faint thrumming of magic in the air. Tinasha had felt this sensation of drifting magic once before—when she was reading the invitation from Farsas to the banquet. It was daytime then, and she hadn't been concerned, reasoning that someone in the castle was casting. What could anyone be doing this late?

It was very, very weak. Tinasha couldn't sense any sort of spell configuration, either. The magic was so faint that it was impossible to tell where it was coming from, but it still left Tinasha wary.

She frowned. "Am I overthinking it…?"

This was the Magic Empire, after all. In the town at the foot of the castle, people were surely using magic.

She was shaking her head to dispel her worries when someone wrapped their arms around her from behind, nearly causing her to fall out the window.

"Oscar! Don't sneak up on me!" she cried.

"I wasn't trying to. Were you thinking hard about something? You'll catch a chill out there," he warned, reaching past her to close the window. He had arrived via the transportation array. Noticing how cold his fiancée had gotten, he placed his coat around her shoulders.

A faint blush on her cheeks, Tinasha said, "Thank you."

"It's nothing. Have you been a good girl? It doesn't look like anything's changed," Oscar commented. Ever since Tinasha had formed the array, he'd used it every night to come over and check to make sure everything was all right.

Tinasha wasn't sure how to feel about it. Having someone look after her so carefully made her feel like she was living in the Dark Age again. Her powers were on par with a witch's, which meant no one treated her the way her fiancé did, like she was a child to be cared for.

As Tinasha went to fetch the liqueur she kept for Oscar, she shrugged. "No, no changes. Oh, but about my investigation, this wild-goose chase has finally led us to one person I'm very suspicious of."

"Oh yeah?"

Between dispatching spirits to investigate and her visit to the fortune-teller, Tinasha had been busy gathering information from all over. The key to the puzzle ended up coming from Aurelia, a member of the royal family of Gandona, one of Farsas's neighbors. Confidentially, Tinasha had asked Aurelia to relay anything she knew about mysterious cases of entire villages being destroyed. Aurelia, with her natural perceptiveness, intuited what

Tinasha was after. In addition to details on cases in Gandona, Aurelia passed along a description of an incident from eight years earlier in a small country to the east.

"It's a nation called Cathlys. Eight years ago, every single person in a small settlement abruptly died," Tinasha explained.

"Eight years ago? That's the oldest one yet," Oscar remarked.

Every night, he had a drink with Tinasha, listening to how her investigation was proceeding. He was slowly drinking his way through the bottles of liqueur she kept on a shelf in her room as decoration. No matter how much Oscar consumed, his behavior didn't change at all; Tinasha wondered if he might not actually have been human.

Her own glass of chilled water in hand, Tinasha passed Oscar the documents she'd been reading. "They know who attacked the place in Cathlys, however. A mage named Bardalos used magic and hexes to raze a village of nearly one hundred to the ground overnight."

Oscar nodded. "Sounds almost exactly like all the others. What was his motive?"

"A town-wide attack experiment. A long time ago, Tuldarr also had mages who devised large-scale forbidden curses that would target cities. In reality, it's completely impractical for one person's curse to destroy an entire city. But this mage supplemented his hex with regular attack magic and psychological spells, thereby making it possible to lay waste to a town. He brought his proposal to the Cathlys royal castle."

"That's…one weird court mage," Oscar commented.

"No, he wasn't a court mage. While he possessed plenty of talent, he was refused because of issues with his personality. In response, he presented his town-wide attack idea, but naturally, his designs were ignored."

"Of course. He was only making it worse for himself at that point," Oscar remarked, shaking his head in dismay.

Tinasha agreed with him. Bardalos fell into disgrace because he didn't understand the social implications of his proposition. Or perhaps he did and brought it before the court for the hell of it.

Cathlys ignored his proposal, so Bardalos set out to prove just how viable his theory was.

Tinasha perched on the armrest of Oscar's chair. "He had numerous other offenses, too, and likely more that haven't yet come to light. It's no wonder he was barred from becoming a court mage. Apparently, he ran about, completely uncontrolled in the smaller countries on the border."

"And they couldn't stop him after all that?" Oscar asked.

"When he wiped out that village, they were going to execute him. But Bardalos annihilated the squadron sent to capture him. Only one man survived. Based on his testimony, those in charge verified that Bardalos was indeed responsible. Because the casualties had piled so high, Cathlys gave up on capturing him and banished him instead. No one knows where he went after that…"

“What the hell? Why’d they just let him go? He’s a threat to society.”

“Cathlys is a small country, and they didn’t have enough mages who could fight back against him. I wish they had consulted with Tuldarr before things got so bad.” Tinasha sighed, refilling Oscar’s empty glass. She set the liqueur bottle on the shelf and resettled on Oscar’s lap.

“We’ve made some major progress now that we can identify our suspect, but catching him will be like looking for a needle in a haystack. Still, I’ve uncovered what he looks like, and I know I’m going to catch him one of these days,” she stated firmly.

“You *know* you’re going to?”

“Oh, that’s right, I didn’t tell you. Oscar, do you believe in the concept of a fortune-teller with completely accurate readings?”

“I do not,” he replied immediately, which Tinasha had half expected. She was a little disappointed, but she knew that explaining the mysteries of precognitive abilities would derail their conversation.

She crossed her legs from her position on his lap. “For the time being, all I can do is continue my research while alerting the rulers of each country that’s involved.”

As Bardalos continued his attacks, it had occurred to Tinasha to place barriers on every village, but there were simply too many.

While Tinasha was still unsure of what action to take next, Oscar said decisively, “When you’re up against someone like that, you just have to beat them to the next spot they’re going to hit.”

“I considered that, but there are far too many potential targets. I wish we could at least narrow down the country,” she responded.

“We can,” Oscar said flatly, which made Tinasha gape at him.

She turned in his lap to look him in the face. “What? Really?”

“With about fifty-fifty odds. Did you notice that there are one or two cases a year and that the number of casualties has been steadily rising each time?”

“I did recognize that. At first, it was rural farm villages, but the latest one was a pretty bustling community,” Tinasha said.

“Whether he’s doing it to test his limits or to shake things up, he keeps attacking larger places. If this keeps up, they won’t exactly be villages anymore, will they? More like towns. But there’s probably going to be some professional mages in a town.”

Tinasha nodded. “Well… Yes, that’s true. At least one or two.”

Simon was a magic user who had lived in a village, but he wasn’t a mage—he was a musician by trade.

However, he was an outlier. There were a few dedicated mages in just about any town, whether for defense or healing purposes. That much Tinasha could follow, but she didn’t understand where Oscar was going with this and gave him a puzzled look.

His blue eyes regarded her evenly. “Bardalos is definitely giving Tuldarr a wide berth. If Simon’s story is to be believed, there’s some time between

when he decides on a target and when he goes through with destroying it. That means he carefully avoids any potentially dangerous elements. A person like that wouldn't consider widening their scope *or* risking battle against mages."

"Mm-hmm. That's right."

"But there's one country that doesn't have any mages at all—that won't *permit* mages, no matter how big the city is," Oscar pointed out.

"Oh…"

Oscar's smile was tight as he stared into her dark eyes. Realization dawned on Tinasha, and she cried, "You think their next target is Tayiri?!"

"That's what I'd do, anyway. Low risk," Oscar confirmed immediately. Tinasha didn't miss the displeasure that flashed across his fine features. Leaning into his chest, she let out a low groan.

He was exactly right. Two of the incidents had already occurred in Tayiri, but all other countries had only seen one attack each. That didn't exempt Tayiri from being the next target. In fact, it probably spoke more to how much easier it was to operate there.

Tinasha floated up into the air and wound her arms around Oscar's neck. "We could send them a straightforward warning… No, we couldn't. I don't think Tayiri would listen to anything I have to say. Maybe I'll send out some spirits."

"If you've got something you want me to do, you better tell me. You're not allowed to get up to anything dangerous," Oscar warned. He set down his glass and stood to embrace Tinasha. She cuddled into him innocently, and he grinned as he pulled her close.

"I'll be careful. You've told me enough times already," she said.

"If you were truly being cautious, I wouldn't need to hold myself back so much," Oscar replied dryly, conscious of her body heat through the thin fabric of her nightgown. While Tinasha's true age was over four hundred, she still behaved like a young girl and was oblivious to her seductive charm. When she cocked her head at him like a bemused kitten, Oscar grimaced and set her down on the bed.

He tousled her hair. "I'll be heading back now. See you tomorrow."

"You're not going to sleep over?"

"I'm not up for the chore of hauling you into the bath in the morning. It'll make me late *and* I'll end up soaking wet, too."

Tinasha regularly dropped off to sleep like a rock but could hardly be roused in the mornings. Because of this, Oscar had taken to hurling her into the bathtub, clothes and all. She whined of course, but it did get her to open her eyes.

Reminded of that fact, Tinasha looked abashed. "I-I'm so sorry. But I don't think I can fix it in three months…"

"Then you need to work harder! But I suppose once you come to Farsas, you can sleep as much as you want. You'll be our sleepyhead queen."

"Urgh, no, I'll work on it…"

While Tinasha was busy with her everyday royal duties, her wedding was fast approaching, as was her abdication. Once she became queen consort of Farsas, Tinasha would have much less work to do, but that didn't mean she could sleep in all day.

As Tinasha curled up remorsefully, Oscar pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Go to sleep. Good night."

"Good night," she whispered back. Then Oscar returned to his own bed.

But there would only be a little while longer of that. Before long, they would blend their lives into one. Together, their days would be relaxed and happy. Such was the worth each of them placed on the other.

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He hadn't told anyone that his big sister was coming home for a visit.

She was a mage, after all, and she served the court of Tuldarr. Everyone in town had believed she'd died of illness when she was little. That definitely meant he couldn't tell anyone.

The boy ran along the main avenue with arms full of the fruit he had bought for his sister. When he approached a crossroads, he noticed a crowd of people gathered. They were all clustered around a notice board with a poster stuck to it, buzzing among themselves. The boy stood on his tiptoes, struggling to see between the gaps in the throng.

"What does it say?" the boy asked a man next to him.

"It says a serial killer's escaped. Farsas and Cezar are both looking for him. You better watch out, kid."

The boy's eyes grew wide. People from other countries had never conducted a search like this before. There was no way of knowing just how dangerous this criminal was.

Ultimately, the boy gave up on fretting over some piece of paper he couldn't see and headed home.

And because of that, he didn't know what the man on the poster looked like, and neither did his sister.

Thus, Tris ended up meeting this very, very dangerous man without knowing a thing about who he was.

The man was just as surprised to meet her. While he was scoping out the town he had targeted, he ran into a girl in the woods on the outskirts.

Had she been an ordinary sort, and had they not been in Tayiri, he could have concocted some excuse and escaped. Unfortunately, her eyes widened the instant she saw him.

"Wait, you're a mage?"

Tris could tell at a glance that the man had magic. He recognized how out of the ordinary it was for two mages to meet in a country that wasn't supposed to have any at all, but she didn't.

Snapping out of her shock, she gave him a relieved smile. “Are you back home for a visit, too? I’m so glad it’s a fellow mage who caught me! I thought I was going to worry Queen Tinasha again.”

“Queen Tinasha?” the man repeated, his eyes narrowed. But the girl didn’t notice, lost in her own thoughts.

“Do you mean the Queen of Tuldarr?” he asked.

“Yes. She’s very beautiful and strong! Where are you from?”

“I’m… I live in Farsas now. But wow, I’m jealous. I’d love to serve Tuldarr,” he said.

“Oh really?”

“You’re a court mage? That sounds great. Hey, would you mind putting in a good word for me? I really want to study in Tuldarr. I have a younger brother who has an incurable disease,” the man explained.

If Tris were a more experienced court mage, she would have known to be suspicious of this man’s assertion. She was too young for that, however. A cloud passed over her childlike features. “Your little brother…?”

She recalled her own brother, who was just twelve years old. Tris had fled to Tuldarr when she was five, so they had barely played together. Still, she loved him dearly, and her brother worshipped her every time she came home for a visit. Tris wanted to bring her whole family over to Tuldarr and give them a life free of hardship.

Sympathy welling within her breast, Tris made up her mind and looked at the man. “Okay, sure, I’ll do that for you. Oh, can you make teleportation portals?”

“As well as anyone, yes.”

“Then could you take me to the town outside Tuldarr Castle? I’m not very good at long-distance teleportation.”

“Sure. It’s the least I can do in exchange for an introduction to people in Tuldarr.”

“Thanks! Let’s meet again here tonight, then. Sound good?”

“Yep. I’ll see you then,” Bardalos agreed, an amused smile on his lips as he watched the girl grin and run off with a wave.

Upon discovery, Bardalos had feared he’d screwed up, but that hadn’t been the case at all. Coincidence had dropped an unforeseen opportunity in his lap.

Tris hadn’t seen that wicked smile on the posters around town, so she remained ignorant of the fact that her carelessness had just saved her hometown.

Even court mages couldn’t teleport directly into the city while accompanying outsiders. Therefore, Tris had Bardalos teleport them first to the capital’s immigration checkpoint, which was connected to major foreign cities via transportation arrays and handled inspections of visitors from other countries.

Bardalos produced forged identification papers and stated his purpose of entry as study. He had learned that doing so made it easy to wander

between nations. Unlike those countries, however, Tuldarr measured visitors' magic and had them officially register it.

After Bardalos received permission to enter, Tris showed him around the castle city. Impressed, Bardalos praised Tuldarr. "Just as I'd expect—the Magic Empire has special defenses built into its main city. I suppose that's also why they limit the amount of magic that temporary visitors can use."

"They do? I had no idea."

"You're a court mage, so you have no limits on your magic. But all other citizens of Tuldarr and temporary residents are divided into grades, and each grade dictates the amount of magic you can use. Of course, no one will be punished right away for going over that limit, but you need to apply in advance. If you fail to do so, you must undergo a royal inspection afterward. In short, the castle will sense any outsider's unauthorized use of large-scale magic and come to question them. That's also why there are wards strung up all over the city. They're quite meticulous."

The magical defenses in Tuldarr's capital could be described as the best in all the mainland. While he was certainly impressed, Bardalos muttered, "But there's no such thing as a perfect defense. You have only to use magic so weak the wards won't detect it. That's a very complicated spell and one that takes a long time, but…"

"Um, is something wrong?" asked Tris, looking up with some confusion at the man's whisperings.

He smiled at her. "How about I treat you to some tea as thanks for bringing me into the country? Of course, I have many things I want to ask you about as well, so it's not entirely a selfless offer."

"I've only just become a court mage, so I probably can't answer most of your questions, though," she pointed out.

"Oh? But I know how important you are. You know the queen, don't you?"

"Yes, but…"

"Then that's perfect. I want to know what the queen is like," he said.

Bardalos was interested in the mage at the head of the Magic Empire because she had noticed his experiments.

No proof should have survived his tests, which had begun in his homeland of Cathlys. And yet *someone* had detected what he was up to and sent out warnings to every nation.

The warnings had come from Tuldarr, meaning *she* was behind them—this fiancée to the king of Farsas and a figure who also held sway in Cezar because of the crystal mines.

This preeminent mage of the era, the sovereign Queen of Tuldarr, had exposed him.

According to rumor, she had popped up one day out of the blue ten months before and jumped right to the head of the succession line.

But more important than the mystery of her origins was the fact that she was an exceptional mage and a willing combatant on the battlefield. The

idea of an individual with such immense power reminded Bardalos most of a witch, yet the whereabouts of all the witches were unknown. The Queen of Tuldarr, on the other hand, was a different story.

She would be abdicating in two months, which meant that, as far as Tuldarr was concerned, she was only filling in as ruler. How did she intend to live after relinquishing the throne? For Bardalos, that seemed like an opportunity he couldn't ignore.

He led Tris down an alley off the main road and into a tea shop, where he invited her to sit at a table facing the street. She seemed hesitant, but broke into a smile when a cup of fragrant tea arrived. "Her Majesty is… beautiful. You wouldn't even think she's human like the rest of us. Also, she's very nice. She even had a spirit accompany me on my visit."

"A royal spirit, huh? Does she always keep them around?" Bardalos inquired.

"I don't think so. Eir—one of the spirits—said he doesn't come unless she calls for him. Most of the court mages have never met one of the twelve."

"She employs them sparingly, then. I suppose she only has them keep the surrounding countries at bay."

"The queen often goes out to handle tricky situations herself. She lets Prince Legis, our next king, take care of the more day-to-day stuff."

"Yes, I've heard. People say she was at the head of the army when Tuldarr intervened in the war between Farsas and Yarda," Bardalos commented.

"And when I first met her, she was disguised as a young girl and blended right in. I guess having that much magic means you have just as much freedom, too," Tris reasoned.

Her innocent words revealed how little she knew, and Bardalos smiled. It had been fun to secretly wipe out those villages without anyone catching on. Adjusting and changing his spells and curses bit by bit had allowed him to test his powers.

However, it was lonely to be a powerful mage, which was why they—who stood apart from the crowd—flocked to Tuldarr. Gathered together, they would stand among equals.

Bardalos believed that to be tantamount to lapsing into obscurity, though. Mages after companionship were only after the sense of reassurance that came from getting absorbed into a sea of identical others.

That wasn't what a mage should be. It was their duty to push their limits.

Surely, the Queen of Tuldarr felt the same.

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How did it feel to know the future?

It seemed convenient, but it was more likely a constant restraint on one's thoughts and actions.

That was how it was for Tinasha, who had only received a hazy glimpse of what was to come. She began to understand a little of why that fortune-teller lived her life without anything fettering her.

Tinasha waited, progressing her investigation however she could during breaks in her royal schedule.

And though she had anticipated the event, she also found it the tiniest bit unexpected.

That evening, with her duties completed, Tinasha returned to her chambers carrying a stack of papers she hadn't dealt with yet.

Her abdication had been moved up abruptly, leaving her with only two months. After she had a bath and changed into comfortable loungewear, Tinasha lay on her stomach on the bed and read through the documents.

A frown formed on her face when she arrived at the last one. "A request for an audience?"

It was from Tris, who had returned from Tayiri the day before. Apparently, a mage friend of hers who was in the country temporarily had a younger brother who was very ill. This acquaintance wished to know if the queen would cure his sibling.

After a bit of consideration, Tinasha went out of her bedroom and called for a lady-in-waiting. Tris arrived about a half hour later in response to the summons. The girl bowed low in Tinasha's bedroom doorway, abashed. "I'm so very sorry to bother you while you're at rest. Thank you for sending the spirit with me. As I wrote in my request, I know someone with a brother who's taken a sudden turn for the worse…"

"It's perfectly all right, although I don't really specialize in healing. Where do you need me to go?"

"Oh, the mage is waiting outside now. May I invite him in?" Tris inquired.

"Go ahead. Time is of the essence, isn't it?" the queen said, tossing only a cloak over her loungewear. Returning to her room, she chose to sit in the frontmost of the chairs for receiving visitors.

Tris and the other mage arrived after a moment and sat opposite Tinasha, who regarded them evenly with a placid smile.

"Tris, is this him?" the queen questioned.

A bashful Tris replied, "Y-yes. I'm so sorry for the audacity."

"May I ask your name?" Tinasha inquired.

"I am Bardalos, Your Majesty."

Silence fell. Beneath the man's amicable expression was a calculating gaze trained on Tinasha.

"Tris, you may leave. I'd like to discuss things with him personally," the queen stated.

"What? But—"

"Tris," the queen interrupted firmly, and the girl half rose from her chair.

Yet the man placed a hand on his acquaintance's shoulder. "I'd like her to stay. Best not to go anywhere."

"Huh?" Tris's confusion deepened.

Bardalos was oblivious to this, however, for he saw nothing save Tinasha anymore. With absolute poise, he remarked, "You seem very calm. I thought you'd been searching for me."

"I have been, and I'm certainly surprised. If it doesn't look like I am, it's because I've known this would happen for a while. Have you heard of unerring fortune-telling?"

"What's that?" asked the man suspiciously.

Tinasha gave a thin smile. "Tris went to Tayiri, and I gather you met her there while scoping out your next victims."

"You've figured me out, huh? Well, I'm glad I didn't overestimate you. It would've been *such* a letdown if it hadn't turned out to be you after all that preparation," Bardalos said, his tone growing enraptured.

Tinasha listened to him, elbow on the armrest of her chair and her chin sitting in her palm.

When Tris mentioned she'd brought an acquaintance with an ailing brother, Tinasha wondered if that might be the culprit she'd been seeking. She hadn't sent Tris back immediately only because she'd required time to determine whether the culprit had enchanted the girl in some way. Tris appeared normal at the moment, but a close inspection was still in order.

Folding her arms, Tinasha cocked her head to one side. "And? I'll hear out why you've come, although I'll be smashing you to a pulp once you're finished."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible. You can't cast a spell *or* summon one of your spirits. And do you know why?" Bardalos drew out a hollow triangular pyramid, letting it rest on his open hand. Tiny silver arrowheads dangled from a thin chain inside it.

Tinasha's lip curled. "That thing's still around? Isn't it a relic from before Tuldarr was founded?"

"Indeed. It's an enchanted implement that can sense magical ability from back when mages were still persecuted and labeled as fiends. I've enhanced it so that it will react when any magic besides mine comes within range. Cast so much as a thread of power my way, and the curse tied to this object will trigger inside the girl's body. It's already taken root inside her; a painful death, to be sure."

"What…? Queen Tinasha…?"

"It's all right, Tris. Stay calm," Tinasha assured as she raised her hands to show Bardalos she would comply. He'd taken great precaution for this meeting. The man must have slipped the core of some hex into Tris's food or drink and made sure she'd consumed it. Still, a simple hex shouldn't have been lethal. Bardalos had to be bluffing, if only partially. Yet if he did have something nasty prepared, Tris would suffer dearly if Tinasha was careless.

Proactive aggression was no longer an option for the queen, and Bardalos grinned broadly with clear satisfaction. “Isn’t it difficult protecting everything all by yourself? No matter how vigilant you are, there will always be gaps. And for all that, you keep bending your ear to whatever request some utter weakling brings to you. You may be revered as a queen, but you’re no different from a slave who serves these fools.”

“You certainly have a lot to say. What does any of that have to do with what you’ve done? You’ve been so careful up until now. Did you really come just to insult me?”

“No. I came to invite you.”

“To what?” Tinasha questioned, frowning. She didn’t miss the way Bardalos’s eyes shone with a sadistic gleam, and she made no attempt to hide her disgust.

He grinned, amused. “I can see you have a lot of opinions about my experiments, but we’re not so different. You’re just as capable as I am of cutting people down like frail blades of grass.”

“Yes, I’ve killed people, but I’m not the same as you.”

“Yes, you are. There’s no whitewashing or justifying murder. You and I both devour others to survive,” Bardalos said, pausing there to regard Tinasha. While her beauty was enough to steal a heart with one look, it offered no warmth now. She exuded only animosity. “So I’ve come to tell you that you’re freer than that.”

“Freer?”

“Yes. I can tell just looking into your eyes. You think all other humans are weak and fragile, don’t you? To you, they’re weeds you can manipulate with a wave of your finger.”

“So what?”

Tinasha didn’t refute the assertion. It was the truth. She was aware that she was an entirely different breed from other humans, though she felt no sense of superiority about it. Because she had been chosen to rule, she would fulfill her duty as a matter of course.

The edges of Bardalos’s lips twitched upward. “Won’t you join me? I want your magic.”

“Excuse me? How about you save the gibberish for the grave,” Tinasha fired back coldly. Tris jumped at that.

“It’s not gibberish. Don’t you have fun when you’re fighting using magic? Doesn’t it give you a rush of pleasure to draw up the perfect spell configuration? That means you love exercising your power. But how much of it do you employ in your daily life? It can’t be more than ten percent at best. With me, you can let loose to your heart’s content. Nothing is taboo. You’ll be able to indulge in whatever comes to mind—all that you could desire. Neither magic nor your intelligence will constrain you.”

For any powerful mage, this was the sweetest of temptations.

Not all mages could flex their strength freely, even if they had the ability to do so. There were limitations. Restraints. The more powerful the mage, the greater they were bound.

Bardalos had thrown off those shackles…and was inviting Tinasha to join him.

"You get it, don't you? Do you know how bored you'll be spending the rest of your life cowed as the queen consort of Farsas?"

Tinasha sighed in disgust. In one fluid movement, she crossed her legs. "I refuse. Don't make me say it again. It's too annoying."

"You're a stubborn one. I guess you don't care if this girl dies, huh?" Bardalos reached out and closed a hand around Tris's neck. The frightened girl's eyes bulged.

Face twisting with displeasure, Tinasha was almost on her feet when a blade of wind sliced toward her, opening a gash from her right cheek to her knees.

A spray of blood went everywhere, and Tris screamed. "Queen Tinasha!"

"Don't shout," Bardalos commanded. Then he turned to Tinasha with a smile. "I don't wish to repeat myself. You understand the loneliness of a powerful mage. I can be the one who gets that about you."

"You're a very confident man, aren't you? Did it not occur to you that I could kill you if we went off together?" Tinasha pointed out.

"You do have a point. That's why I'll be taking this one with us for the time being. That'll help keep you in line."

Bardalos leaned in to whisper something in Tris's ear. She shuddered, and the life faded from her eyes.

Tinasha watched it with revulsion. "Is that a hex, too? How tedious."

"The good thing about hexes is that others can't parse them easily. People are far weaker than they believe. You only need to work on the mind, and you can warp it without much effort."

"Is that how you got all those villages to catch on fire?"

"Yes, although it didn't go that smoothly at first. Thanks to all my experiments, I've grown pretty confident in my psychological magic, though I'm no Witch of Silence."

Wiping the blood from her cheek with her thumb, Tinasha glanced at the clock. Bardalos followed her gaze and noted the time as well.

She was more of a fool than he thought.

He hadn't thought she would agree right after speaking to him.

But she was more stubborn than anticipated. He'd believed that she, of all people, would see the reason in his invitation.

In any case, she must not have been listening properly. All the power in the world was insignificant without the mind to control it.

But such a colossal amount of magic would still prove useful.

Bardalos looked at the clock again.

It was nearly time. The man had laid everything out very carefully in town before coming to the palace, establishing a complicated spell utilizing

a low, undetectable level of magic. He couldn't take too long with it, so he'd ended up linking it to a small ignition spell set nearby. That would suffice for starting a fire. The spark would trigger a chain reaction with other magic in the vicinity and grow into an inferno Bardalos imagined the flames of which would rise high enough to be visible from the castle windows.

And with that moment of distraction, Bardalos would plant a hex in her mind. Even this all-powerful queen couldn't break another's curse instantaneously. Once he was in, victory would be his. The queen was a fool, but she understood the loneliness and constraints of life as a mage. Exploiting that would allow him to manipulate her any way he desired. Ultimately, she was only a little girl with nowhere to go. Surely that explained why she'd accepted a political marriage with Farsas.

Tinasha sat there silently, legs crossed primly, paying no mind to the blood oozing from the gash. She truly had nerves of steel.

Her dark eyes seemed to reflect and absorb everything. Before he knew it, Bardalos was holding his breath.

But the fire was about to start. He couldn't miss this moment.

"Were you born with that magic? I'd love to see how much of it has seeped into your guts," he said.

"Why are mages like you always so eager to rip my belly open?"

"I'm just curious. Your entire body is like a very, very valuable catalyst," Bardalos explained, lifting a hand.

There was a soft noise, and acute pain lanced through Tinasha, causing her to double over. Glancing down, she saw a slender stake crafted of magic piercing her stomach. The black spike faded away to reveal fresh blood gushing from the finger-width wound it had left.

Tinasha gave a shaky breath and sat back up, eyeing with a cold gaze the blood streaming into her lap.

"Tell me you'll be mine. I can understand you," Bardalos commanded.

"I have never once wished for someone to understand me," Tinasha answered, smiling and shrugging.

Her grin made Bardalos uncomfortable, and he glanced at the clock. "What's going on?" he muttered.

No fire had started.

It was past time, but that couldn't be. He had checked the spell repeatedly while casting it.

Although he attempted to conceal his agitation, Bardalos heard the queen giggle—an exceedingly unpleasant sound to him. Flicking his gaze to her, he saw blood running from her stomach, pooling on the floor of the dark room.

"What did you do?" he demanded.

"I haven't done anything."

"Then why are you laughing?"

"Sorry… I was just considering the best way to kill you, and it slipped out."

“You think *I’m* going to die?” Bardalos snarled, his expression tight as he threw out a hand to claw at her throat.

He would cast a spell to forcibly show her who was in charge in this situation.

Before he could, however, a man called from behind:

“What do you think you’re doing?”

The impact came as he spoke. Bardalos couldn’t get a word out; his world had suddenly gone dark. He couldn’t see a thing. By the time he finally realized his chair had been yanked from under him and he was pressed with his face to the floor, a sharp pain was cut through his right leg.

Bardalos’s mind went blank and he screamed. “AAAAAHHHH!”

“I asked you what you think you’re doing. You’d better answer quick, if you want to keep your leg,” instructed a masculine voice seething with fury.

Bearing the pain as best he could, Bardalos attempted to cast, but his magic refused to take shape. It wasn’t that he couldn’t concentrate—the power was dispersing as he called it.

With his heel firmly planted on Bardalos and the royal sword stabbed into the mage’s leg, Oscar looked at his fiancée, tutted irritably, and snapped, “What are you waiting for? Heal your wounds.”

It was over too soon. Tinasha made a face as she approached Tris, who was unconscious. Pressing her forehead against the girl’s, she focused on the magic inside her. “Hmm, I think it’s a type of curse that makes you feel phantom pain. I can break it once I apply a pain-killing spell.”

Tinasha thought up a spell, one that would be the most optimal in the shortest amount of time. She placed a hand on Tris’s chest.

“Recede.”

The incantation was but one word. Tris shuddered, but that was the only change. She sank into her chair. Tinasha sighed now that the treatment had been successfully administered. With a hand on her stomach, she intoned another spell and mended the little hole. All the while, Bardalos’s screams echoed around the room.

His foot still pinning the other man, Oscar fixed him with a glare and barked, “Whose woman do you think she is? You’re going to pay for that.”

Bardalos wailed, having lost all desire to fight. He thrashed about on the floor in an attempt to escape Akashia, which was stuck into the floor after slicing his ear off.

Pressing his hands to his own ears to muffle the mage’s shrieks, Oscar said to Tinasha, “What a racket. Who the hell is this guy?”

“He’s the one who set all those villages on fire. He came here of his own accord,” she answered.

“Really? What a complete idiot. And why did you let him do as he pleased to you?” Oscar demanded.

“He limited my magic. But also I knew you’d come if I waited,” Tinasha replied. That was why she had picked a chair close to the front of the room.

She knew that her guests would sit opposite her, putting their backs to Oscar when he arrived via the array in her bedroom.

The explanation did little to ease Oscar's anger, however, and his face twisted with irritation. "You get yourself into *way* too many scrapes."

Someone pounded at the door. Guards had heard Bardalos's screams and had come running.

On this no longer quiet night, the series of incidents that had claimed the lives of more than two thousand over the past eight years finally came to a surreptitious end.

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Bardalos was given a quick painkiller so he could talk, but he knew that did not mean he would be spared. While he was bound on the floor, a pair of men carried on a terrifying conversation about what to do with him.

"Give him to me. He destroyed a village in Farsas, so I'll execute him there," Oscar demanded.

"But he was captured here in Tuldarr, and he's harmed our queen… Let's each take half of his body."

"Lengthwise, then. Do you want the left or the right?"

"Oh, but while we're on the subject, we should consider the other countries he's wronged, too. I think there were a total of nine."

"No, two attacks were in Tayiri, so that makes eight."

"So then nine equal pieces including Tuldarr's two shares," stated Legis.

As the king of Farsas contemplated how best to carve up Bardalos with the sword in his grip, Tinasha stopped him. "Don't do it in my rooms. The smell will be impossible to air out."

"But there's already blood everywhere," Oscar pointed out.

"Yes, removing the stains will be awful. We'll probably have to replace the carpets." Tinasha stood. She'd healed all her wounds, changed into fresh clothes, and restored Tris. Tinasha had expected that breaking the curse would require much more time than it had. However, the caster was her prisoner now. Oscar's rough interrogation method—torture—had pushed Bardalos to reveal what she needed to visualize the basic spell he'd cast, allowing her to neutralize it effectively.

The queen approached Bardalos and knelt next to his head. "I have one last question for you. Do you know a man named Valt?"

A shadow crossed Oscar's and Legis's faces when they heard that name. Bardalos only swallowed a mouthful of bloody saliva and shook his head. After a pause, he gritted his teeth and said, "I don't."

"Really? Well, I suppose that's for the best. I puzzled over the most effective way to capture you for a while, yet you delivered yourself to me. Thank you," Tinasha said with a bright smile.

Bardalos's lip curled in a sneer. "Someday you'll be lonely and regret rejecting me."

“No, I won’t,” she replied decisively, placing a hand on his forehead. All the darkness of the abyss in her eyes pierced his own. “I’ve never once feared loneliness.”

It was the gloom she always dragged behind her. She had never thought it frightening or tried to avoid it.

As far as Tinasha could remember, she had always been lonely. The only one to fill that void was the man she met when she was thirteen. Regardless of what the future held, and no matter what regrets awaited, she would never be dissatisfied for choosing him. She had reached her goal.

“And there’s one more thing. I would never pick a weak man,” she added with a sweet, beatific smile.

Tinasha was a person capable of killing, the type who found battle fun.

And she would use her power to claim another life now. There was no doubt in her mind. Bardalos’s face grew taut and pale as the queen’s magic coalesced and took shape.

Lacking all pity, Tinasha peered down at Bardalos and whispered, “Good-bye.”

His scream tore through the night.

With her devastating power holding him down as he writhed in agony, Tinasha watched until the end, never looking away.

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“What you just did—is his brain broken now?”

“If it was, we’d have no way of interrogating him for the record. I simply ruptured his magic into pieces. I’ve planted a spell in his body that will shred his power again if it heals. It’s extremely painful, so it will be difficult for him to retain sanity,” Tinasha explained with a self-deprecating smile, answering Oscar’s question as if discussing the weather.

The two of them had moved from Tuldarr to Oscar’s bedroom in Farsas Castle. Following Tinasha’s destruction of Bardalos’s magic, she’d made arrangements to have everything cleaned up and taken care of. Then Legis had sent Tinasha and Oscar to Farsas, so the queen’s rooms could be scrubbed as an added safety measure.

After an investigation, and once all of Bardalos’s crimes came to light, the other affected countries would be notified. If there were no objections, Tuldarr would handle the execution.

As Tinasha lay on her stomach on the bed, Oscar took her comb and started brushing her hair. She craned her neck to give him an odd look. “What are you doing?”

“It’s fun to watch it get shinier. It’s like grooming a cat’s coat,” he replied.

Tinasha boggled at him for a moment before covering her mouth as she yawned. So much had happened, and it was three hours past her usual

bedtime. She harbored no delusions that she'd be able to wake up tomorrow morning.

Oscar, however, was a king who never slept in. Coldly, he warned her, "You're way too careless. Don't just let people into your bedroom."

"I told you that I didn't seriously suspect him at first. And since my bedroom is where you teleport to, it's actually the safest of my chambers, in a sense," Tinasha countered.

"Unbelievable…"

She knew what time Oscar always dropped by, so it hadn't seemed like there was any cause for worry. It had only been a matter of waiting until he arrived.

Turning her face down, Tinasha let herself begin to drift off. A light pinch on the cheek from Oscar tugged her back into the waking world, however.

"Ow…"

"You need to fight back as soon as you face off against someone! Don't let them do whatever they want to you!"

"Hmph. It's not like it was a very big injury."

"But it hurts *me* to see you hurt," Oscar argued, setting the comb aside and lying on his back. His blue eyes glanced over at Tinasha.

She closed her eyes and sighed. After some deliberation, she decided to come out and say it. "Oscar."

"What?"

"He told me that I'm the type of person who enjoys fighting—that I devour others to survive."

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it?"

"Being strong makes killing easy, but that power doesn't remove a person's doubt to go through with it. Knowing you, I'm sure it makes you *more* hesitant, right? Besides, you're so much stronger than other people that I bet it's rare you feel exhilarated during a battle."

"Oscar…"

How did he understand all that about her so well?

Executing a criminal or dispatching an enemy was no cause to doubt wielding her power.

And although Tinasha believed that, she did occasionally think about how unfair it was for her to carry so much strength. That said, if she was up against someone just as mighty—or if she had a hard time killing them—it was harder to justify reluctance.

There was nothing she could do when ridiculed or despised for her incredible power. Regardless, it needed to be wholly controlled, for magic had no personality. There was only the will of the user.

Thus, while she may have harbored doubts or flinched when the time came, she would stand firm. Whether she chose not to act or got spooked by

the casualties that would result, she would never cower. She had decided to be this way a long time ago.

“If you’re having doubts about it, go ahead and have them. That isn’t a bad thing in and of itself. There are times when someone has to be the one to kill. And you’re capable of living with that, aren’t you?”

Tinasha couldn’t hold back a snort at that. She had almost never seen Oscar paralyzed by uncertainty. She knew that was one of his strengths—and it allowed him to be kind.

“I…don’t think you’re telling me to just turn the negative into a positive or something optimistic like that. You only ever say things as they are… I love that about you,” she confessed.

Despair would never become hope.

Instead, he helped her move past despair, without changing it. He supported her in that and gave her strength, which made it possible for her to share those things with him.

Aware that she had been slowly changing since meeting him, Tinasha gave a little smile. She used both hands to push her sleepy self upright and gazed into his eyes, which were the color of a young night sky. He looked back at her, his gaze compelling her to follow him unconditionally.

She didn’t need him to understand her. The sense of peace and feelings of passion he gave her were only parts of the full picture.

The only thing she wanted was him.

Tinasha closed her eyes and gave him a kiss conveying all the heat she was feeling. She pulled back to gaze down at his beautiful face. “I feel… desire.”

“I *swear* I’m going to teach you to stop toying with a man’s heart one of these days,” Oscar grumbled, letting out the most frustrated groan, and Tinasha burst out laughing. She curled up next to him and closed her eyes.

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The girl slipped through the moonlight undetected. It took her longer than anticipated in the castle city, but three hours later, she finally finished making the rounds of all the crucial points and teleported back to the mansion.

Valt was waiting for her in her room when she returned. He set about making tea. “How did it go?”

“There was an odd spell set up in town, so I removed it. It seemed to be a timer that would set all the buildings in the vicinity on fire when triggered. That sort of thing would only inconvenience us.”

“Oh? Sounds like the work of a fairly talented mage, if it escaped Tuldarr’s notice.”

“It’s no laughing matter. Whoever it was went right ahead and linked their spell to mine,” Miralys huffed.

Valt gave her a smile. “I’m glad you undid it in time. We certainly don’t want them noticing us now. Thank you, Miralys.”

His praise caused her to turn bright red, but she ignored the color in her cheeks and pasted on a prim face as she went on. “Aside from that, my check confirmed that everything is nearly complete. It’s grown enough.”

“Good. Thank you for your hard work,” Valt replied, grinning with pleasure.

However, a shadow passed over his accomplice’s face. “Is it really going to be okay? Will it work?”

“It’s a bit late to be asking questions like that. Of course it’s going to be fine. We’ve put in so much time and planned very carefully,” he assured her.

“And…you’re not going to disappear, right?” Miralys pressed, voicing the one fear she’d carried the entire time.

Valt didn’t answer. Still smiling, he offered Miralys a steaming cup of tea, but she didn’t accept it; she kept staring straight at him. “Answer me, Valt. I can’t act until you do.”

“If you…hadn’t met me, you could have been so much happier,” he remarked.

Miralys scowled. “What’s that supposed to mean? Are you making fun of me?”

“I’m not. I really think that, Miralys. I know it. But no matter how many times I go through this, I end up meeting you. I’ll want to find you. It’s very annoying.”

“This will be the last time. Right?”

“Yes… It will,” Valt said, his grin shadowed by the moonlight streaming in from outside.

Despite feeling no more reassured than before, Miralys accepted the tea at last. She took a sip and found it a little bitter.

Valt closed his eyes. “Our preparations are made. But there’s one last thing I have to check first.”

Teacup in hand, he turned to face away from Miralys and gazed up at the azure moon. It glowed exquisitely with eternal loneliness.

“I need her to surpass the outsiders. If she can’t, then no one will. That’s why we’re having her build up all these experiences.”

“Does she really possess that much power? Maybe she’ll lose,” Miralys said, a little sourly.

Grinning, Valt proclaimed happily, “I know her very well. Much better than that king of Farsas does. Despite the overwriting of the past, she’s still the strongest witch—and the secret weapon this world has been waiting for.”

Fate did not remain stagnant. It turned continually, swinging violently on its axis. This man was doing all he could to get it to budge just a little one way as he stood amid a battle that he’d already fought time and time again.

3. The Pride of the Past

Whispers influenced people. They heard what they wanted to believe and let the honeyed words sway their hearts.

Valt knew that this couldn't be dismissed as a weakness. It was natural for people to cling to hope as long as they lived. Humans would always wish for joy over sadness, for bliss rather than pain. People who couldn't see the future made their way in the world with ignorance as their salvation.

But he, lacking that escape, had no choice but to cling to a single hope. And he wouldn't hesitate to trample others to make it real. The world would get overwritten anyway. Their agony and deaths would disappear in time.

Valt sighed as he came upon the mouth to a small cavern deep in a forest. "Here we are. There really is no path at all."

Overgrown trees blocked the mouth entirely, and there had been no trail of any sort to follow. He'd managed to locate it by teleporting from nearby using data from his ancestors' records.

A flash of his magic burned away the trees at the cave's entrance. He pressed a hand to the barrier preventing anyone from entering. "As rock-solid as I expected. This might take some time."

Valt began an incantation to nullify the barrier, which may as well have been a thick iron wall. No halfhearted efforts would break it. By the time the lengthy incantation finished and the way was cleared, sweat dappled Valt's forehead and night had fallen. Shoulders heaving with his breaths, Valt stepped into the cave.

At the end of a narrow, winding path, he found what he was looking for.

A beautiful woman lay on a stone pedestal. She had light-brown curly hair and held an ancient oval looking glass.

He only needed the mirror. But he saw that an even more complicated barrier than the one at the entrance protected the object from theft.

Valt licked his lips nervously. "Can I make off with this without rousing her?"

He had two strategies prepared. This was the second. If his predecessor's account was correct, she shouldn't wake unless the mirror was broken. If that was wrong, Valt would die.

Taking a deep inhale to steady his breathing, Valt started another long incantation.

The world began to move again.

※

As the last month of the year approached its midpoint, the Farsas Castle city bustled with celebratory activity.

The king's wedding was only a month into the new year. An air of revelry was already taking hold of the city, but not every denizen welcomed the impending nuptials. A woman who lived in a large estate near the castle eyed the capital's festive mood with cynicism.

The twenty-year-old was not the legitimate heir to the estate. She was the daughter of the duke and an outside woman, a Gandonan. She had been born in Gandona and had lived there with her mother until she turned thirteen, which saved her from the child abductions that plagued Farsas. When her mother died, she was taken in by her father and moved here.

"If only I could turn back time," she whispered, winding a strand of long golden hair around her finger.

She didn't want to remember him, yet she did anyway. Her thoughts had turned to someone who was once very close but was now distant. During their final conversation, she'd sensed that their lives would never intersect again.

Initially, she hadn't loved him. She'd felt two contradictory things for the man—curiosity and respect. There was no reason for her to still feel sorrow or regret over his absence.

Even so, thoughts of him surfaced at all hours. His face would flash through her mind even though she didn't want to see it.

This had been the case for half a year. She wanted to forget all about him.

Regardless of her desperation, she also understood she would likely never forget him.

Perhaps that was why she listened to the words of a shifty man.

※

Suppose there was a small forest.

Animals, insects, and trees lived out their lives there. Although these woods made gradual movements, they always maintained their core essence.

However, if someone took an interest in the forest and began to watch it and experiment, then it would grow distorted, changing shape into a miniature garden. This observer transformed the world into something else.

Would the insects living within the miniature garden have the power to escape?

Tinasha stared, mesmerized by an exquisitely crafted miniature garden.

The enormous garden was a model of the entire mainland, with each side the length of three adults with arms outstretched. It covered the surface of the desk completely, and it even contained a tiny Tuldarr Castle.

"What incredible artistry," she commented.

"It took the artisans half a year to make. Apparently, they had to redo parts of it after the fall of Druza," Legis replied with a smile.

The miniature garden, a veritable replica of the power structure of the mainland, had been delivered to the castle today. Tinasha squinted at the national borders delineated by vibrant threads and metal fixtures.

Farsas held the largest territory—its lands stretched from the center down to the south. It shared its western border with Tuldarr. The other countries bordering Tuldarr were Tayiri, a handful of minor nations, and a small country called Magdalsia.

The queen nodded as she identified each of these regions. "In the past, hardly anyone lived outside the castle city."

"I suppose it's because we have more mages now," Legis remarked.

"And because the population has grown. The rest of the mages came from Tayiri," she replied, aware that her policies from four hundred years ago had led to this. Once she began accepting refugee mages persecuted in Tayiri, Tayiri retaliated by attacking Tuldarr.

After that war, Tuldarr had not been embroiled in conflict since, because all knew of its unique values centered around magic. In the modern era, Tuldarr stood at the forefront of magic research, always consulting with other countries on spells and mediating magic-related situations.

Legis smiled as he traced the borders of his homeland. "Once your marriage with Farsas is made, we'll be secure for a good while. Please do your best to keep him twisted around your little finger."

"I'll try, but…don't expect too much from me," Tinasha responded. Her fiancé would oblige her personal requests, but he would never concede on official ones. There was no reason to believe that would change once they were married. All that would change, if anything, was that Tinasha would grow more likely to pop a blood vessel over Oscar's reckless behavior.

Chatting evidently reminded Legis of something, and he glanced at the clock. "Isn't it almost time for your wedding gown fitting? Shall I escort you?"

Tinasha shook her head lightly. "I'm teleporting over, so there's no need. Thank you, though."

Farsas dressmakers were sewing her wedding ensemble, which meant Tinasha had to visit regularly for measurements.

Only a month and a half remained until she abdicated and married the king of Farsas. The crossroads was almost upon her.

"Your Majesty, you aren't going to go and observe Queen Tinasha's dress fitting?" asked Lazar.

Oscar glanced up from his paperwork. “Seeing it now will ruin the anticipation for the big day. Besides, she’ll look beautiful in whatever she wears.”

The wedding planning was already in full swing. Naturally, the effort was a joint one with Tuldarr, but the bulk of the workload fell on Farsas, which would be welcoming the bride. There was much to do, leaving Oscar juggling these new responsibilities alongside his regular ones.

Something occurred to him, and he tipped his head to one side. “Oh yeah, should we invite Lavinia?”

“D-don’t ask me!” exclaimed Lazar.

The witch who’d cursed the Farsas royal line was Oscar’s grandmother. The idea of inviting her made Lazar squeamish. He couldn’t tell if it was brazen or reckless to extend that offer so soon after she’d nearly killed Oscar.

Eyeing his friend, who was clearly growing woozy over the idea, Oscar tapped his pen against his temple. “Well, I can just ask my dad about it later. We don’t even know where she lives, anyway.”

“Shouldn’t you consult Queen Tinasha as well?”

“I don’t think she’d be opposed. She’s more likely to ask if we *should* invite the witch, I bet,” said Oscar. Unlike the king, who was born in this era, Tinasha came from four centuries in the past and had no living family. Even in her own time, she’d been separated from her parents soon after her birth to be raised in the castle. Family had been an alien concept for all her life. As a result, she tended to be more concerned about Oscar’s own kin.

“A witch at the wedding, huh?” mused Oscar. Witches were beings of great power who dwelled in the shadows of the world. There were only three, and the blood of a witch ran through his veins. Their immense power was on par with that of the queen he would wed and their future children.

However, Oscar believed individual strength, no matter how great, was not sufficient to change the world. He, his wife, and their children would one day fade into the annals of history, and the power of their lineage would weaken. To Oscar, this wasn’t unfortunate; it was merely the way of things.

Someone knocked at the door, Oscar answered, and a guest entered the study. It was Tinasha, clad in a white, knee-length dress. When Oscar gaped at her, she flicked the skirts of her dress at him.

“Is that your wedding dress? I can see your legs,” he remarked.

“No, this is the same fabric, though. The dressmaker used leftover material from my fittings to make it for me. The real one is much longer,” she replied, twirling around. The skirt filled with air and flared out.

A line appeared between Oscar’s brows. “You really are still a kid…”

“What? Why? Don’t you like it?”

“Of course I do. It’s adorable,” he said, walking over to her. As she beamed at him, he lifted her into his arms and spun around with her just like he would with a small child.

She let out an almost feline yowl, not expecting that at all. Once she was set back down on the floor, she wobbled unsteadily into his chest. “What was that for?”

“You looked like you wanted some attention.”

“I mean, I do… But not like that.” She pouted, cheeks puffing out, and Oscar laughed. He scooped her up in his arms again and carried her over to his desk chair, where he settled her on the armrest and handed her some papers.

Tinasha read them over. “Arrangements for the wedding? Looks complicated.”

“Don’t talk about it like it isn’t *your* wedding. Still, it’s true that we’re handling most of the work over here. All you need to do is show up and get married,” Oscar replied.

Tinasha happened to be a foreign royal, yet in the past, some Farsasian kings had married commoners and made them queens. Farsas would prepare everything down to the jewelry the bride would wear.

But Tinasha was more concerned with another matter entirely. “What are you going to do about security? If all the mages from Tuldarr coming in will pose a problem, I can handle it.”

“You don’t think you’ll be a bit preoccupied being the bride?” Oscar questioned dryly.

“Of course I will, but that doesn’t mean I can’t also handle security. I’ll set a spell to ban magic inside the cathedral. I could place one around the entire castle, but that wouldn’t be good if someone suddenly needed healing,” Tinasha said matter-of-factly as she handed the papers back to Oscar.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Is that what you did at your coronation, too?”

“I didn’t ban magic. That would’ve inconvenienced the Tuldarr mages. However, I maintained a surveillance network. I would’ve known immediately if anyone used unauthorized spells, and I’d have forced them to surrender. I plan to do the same for Legis’s coronation,” she informed him.

“If you ended up forcing someone to surrender at your own wedding, it’d turn into quite the circus…”

Anyone who’d witnessed Tinasha’s coronation knew not to attempt interfering at her wedding. She had inherited the twelve spirits of Tuldarr. The atmosphere in that room had been such that all understood going against her meant death. And she would be bringing all of her spirits with her to Farsas.

Oscar glanced at the woman sharing his chair. “I can’t believe Tuldarr is really going to let you go…”

“Is that how you see it? Don’t you think it’s more dangerous for them to have a security risk like me in the country? No one in Tuldarr has so much as tried to stop me,” Tinasha remarked calmly, but for an instant, Oscar caught a flash of a bottomless abyss in her dark eyes.

He frowned. Once, that power had granted her the throne. Even now, centuries later, her power had necessitated that she rule again.

Should Tuldarr wish to eliminate Tinasha, it could never do so by force. Farsas had Akashia, however, and could potentially control her. That made Oscar a person capable of killing her.

Oscar pressed a hand to his mouth unconsciously. He glanced at Tinasha, and she eyed him quizzically in response. “What is it? You don’t look very good.”

“It’s nothing…”

He hoped that was true. The pair had previously shared minor disagreements, but they’d never led to a complete breakdown in their relationship. It would be all right. They could spend the rest of their lives together at peace.

To banish his inner worries, Oscar tugged on a lock of Tinasha’s hair. She responded by leaning in close to him, which made him press a kiss on her smooth cheek. She blushed like a maiden. “Hey! What was that for?”

“No reason.”

“Your Majesty, have you forgotten that I am still here?” Lazar sighed wearily.

“I haven’t,” replied Oscar.

Tinasha picked up a book lying on the corner of the desk. “Oh? You read fairy tales?”

“I got it for the castle reference library. I don’t have time to look through all of it, but I glance at it from time to time,” he explained.

“Oh, here’s the story on the Mirror of Oblivion. I suppose that it’s remained a mystery even after four centuries, although I have my suspicions that a mirror that can absorb sadness must be a magic implement that utilizes psychological manipulation.”

“Aren’t these stories fictional?” Oscar asked.

“Who can say? That one is from before my time,” Tinasha said innocently as she flipped through the pages. Oscar gave a wan smile as he watched.

The new year was only two weeks away, meaning the king was swamped with work. Yet when he thought about how his future with her waited for him at the end of it all, it didn’t seem so taxing. He was about to begin his life with his chosen partner. All that remained was to trust in that and keep going.

※

Magdalsia was a minor nation to the south of Tuldarr. A small castle and less than twenty villages dotted its forested terrain. Almost all of these were peaceful farm settlements.

Tall mountains and thick forests prevented any road out to the south or west. The only country accessible on foot was Tuldarr. Because of this, Magdalsia maintained a minimal army and had gone hundreds of years

without worrying about foreign aggression. The Magic Empire, founded on land that was originally vast wilds, was indifferent to expanding its territory.

For that reason, Magdalsia was occasionally derided as “Tuldarr’s tail” by the small, war-torn nations in the east of the mainland. However, that didn’t bother anyone in Magdalsia, whose citizens largely prized a peaceful life above all else.

One day, a week before the new year, Queen Gemma of Magdalsia visited her husband’s bedchamber, concerned over how late he was sleeping. King Hubert was in his mid-fifties and had no health problems. He carried out his duties with vigor, though he occasionally indulged in fantasies. While he could not be said to be particularly bright, his good nature made him beloved by the people.

“My king? Are you feeling unwell?” Queen Gemma called. The day before, a rare visitor had come to the castle from another country, a merchant whose assortment of unusual curios had intrigued the king. The merchant had recommended many things, which Hubert gladly purchased.

And now his health had taken a sudden turn. Alarmed by the king’s lack of response, the queen stepped into the room and attempted to shake the king awake. When he wouldn’t rouse no matter how much she shook him, the blood drained from her face.

“My king… Someone! Someone, come quick!” Gemma cried, flying out of the room to summon help.

An ancient mirror lay fallen on the other side of the bed, out of sight.

※

Tinasha was in her study, taking care of her regular royal duties with the new year just around the corner, when urgent news came to her.

She frowned. “Whatever could be the matter at this time of year?”

“The king of Magdalsia has fallen into a mysterious coma. No reason for it can be found, but as he is entirely unconscious, magic is suspected. They request that we come and investigate immediately,” Renart reported calmly. Tinasha plucked the letter from him and scanned it for the salient points.

It explained that the Magdalsian king had fallen unconscious the day before and that the castle physicians and mages had failed to discern a reason. Desperate, Magdalsia was now asking Tuldarr for aid. Tinasha heaved a sigh. “What could it be? I suppose I won’t know unless I go take a look.”

“Shall I send an envoy to carry out the investigation?”

“No, it’s too dangerous with so much unknown. I’ll go myself today,” Tinasha said, deciding.

Renart’s expression didn’t change as he nonetheless offered his candid thoughts. “You’re going to visit personally? We don’t know what this might be. It may very well be a trap laid for you, Your Majesty.”

“That’s true… All right, then I’ll choose someone to come along. Would that suffice?” she said, though it hardly counted as a proper reply.

Renart pulled a long-suffering face.

Tinasha winced. “Legis is most important to Tuldarr right now. I’m only a temporary ruler. And besides… Even if it is a trap, I have a feeling I’ll still come back in one piece.”

Since advancing her abdication, Tinasha had been handing more and more of her duties off to Legis. At this point, he should’ve been able to govern Tuldarr without her.

Despite his queen’s assertion, Renart still wore a sour look. Tinasha’s awareness that she was a temporary ruler and her confidence in her own powerful magic made her act rashly.

Still, none were better equipped to solve a magical problem than she was. After a sigh, Renart fastened his gaze on his queen. “Very well. You should also notify the king of Farsas before departing.”

“Ugh… Do I have to?” Tinasha groaned.

The man she was to marry was a weakness, in a manner of speaking.

He wasn’t weak. She was weak *to him*.

Whenever something happened, he grew upset with her, scolded her, and grumbled that he needed to teach her a lesson. The thought of telling him about this made Tinasha pale instantly.

But she also realized that she couldn’t leave things to chance, and she gave a reluctant nod. “Urgh, fine… But I don’t like it.”

“It’s better than him finding out later and telling you off.”

“Both are equally bad,” Tinasha whined, while divvying up the paperwork in her in-box and arranging for some to be sent to Legis. She assigned Renart the task of selecting her companion on the journey and teleported away.

“And there you have it… I’ll be leaving for Magdalsia now.”

“What do you mean, ‘there you have it’?”

“Ow, ow, ow!” Tinasha cried as Oscar tugged on her earlobe. She had barged in on Oscar while he was in the middle of work, rattled off a suspicious explanation, and was attempting to flee. As she flailed around, close to tears because of his iron grip on her ear, she didn’t appear the ruler of a nation at all. Nor did she even look her age, although that was a complicated matter—Tinasha was over four hundred in the body of a twenty-year-old. It certainly wouldn’t do for her to look her true age.

Oscar finally released his fiancée’s ear, only to grab both her wrists and pull her close. Her dark, teary eyes gazed up at him.

“Listen to me. The new year is right around the corner and our wedding is in only a month. Why are you trying to get yourself involved in such a shady situation?”

“Well, they contacted me…”

“So? Just forget about it. Don’t go.”

“I—I can’t do that,” Tinasha protested. While Magdalsia was a minor nation, it was still Tuldarr’s neighbor. She couldn’t ignore a direct request, and she also had to hurry because the king of Magdalsia’s life hung in the balance.

She cast beseeching eyes up at Oscar. “I’m only going to take a quick peek.”

“Remind me again of how many conflicts you’ve gotten embroiled in after telling me you were only going to take a quick peek?”

“Urgh…”

While Oscar didn’t allow Tinasha’s resentful look to sway him, he let out a little sigh and released her. He lowered a hand onto Tinasha’s head. “Well, I suppose I have to commend you for coming to tell me first, at least. Take your spirits with you and be back by nightfall.”

“You mean you won’t be upset with me if I go?!”

“I reserve the right to go and remove you at any time,” Oscar said, although it was only a warning. In truth, they were equals both in their private lives and as public figures, and he couldn’t exactly interfere in another country’s domestic affairs.

Tinasha broke into a relieved grin and nodded. “I’ll be back before you know it! Thank you!”

Happily, she jumped up to throw her arms around Oscar’s neck, then teleported away and vanished.

The abrupt departure left Oscar dumbfounded. “She really is just a little kid…,” he mused. He couldn’t even imagine what kind of a wife she would make. Would she act like this her whole life?

Tinasha could cloak herself in an aura that was downright terrifying when necessary. Oscar chuckled at the stark contrast she was capable of as he returned to preparing for the new year’s festivities.

※

Trouble was already brewing in Magdalsia before Tinasha arrived. Accompanying her were Pamyra and two military officers. After saying hello to them, Tinasha attempted to summon a spirit. But no matter how long she waited, said spirit didn’t appear. “Senn? Where are you?”

Tinasha’s summonses had never gone unanswered—not during the Dark Age or the present one. Growing frantic, Tinasha made contact with all the other spirits and found that only Senn was unaccounted for.

Mila appeared in his place, and Tinasha fretted to her. “What do you think I should do? What if something’s happened?”

“I’m almost never with him, so I have no idea, but it’s very strange. Unthinkable. Failing to answer your call is a breach of the contract.”

The predicament had left the entire party held up just outside the castle transportation array they were to take. After some thought, Mila gave a light shake of her head. “He’s probably in a situation that’s rendered him

unable to manifest. That's the only thing I can think of. The contract is still there, so he's not dead."

"Itz, Karr, Saiha. Would you search for Senn?" Tinasha ordered. The three spirits heeded her command.

While anxiety still darkened her face, Tinasha forcibly suppressed it and pasted on a smile for her retinue. "I'm sorry about that. Let's be off."

"But Your Majesty—"

"It's all right. We need to hurry," Tinasha cut in, her smile not faltering for a moment. Compared to her previous loss of composure, it was like she was a different person. It was obvious she was concerned, but her responsibilities came first.

The queen drew herself up straight and stepped into the array. It was a portal installed one hundred and fifty years ago at the wishes of both Tuldarr and Magdalsia, linking directly to the latter's capital city.

Upon the group's arrival, guards came to escort them to the castle's main gate. There they were greeted by Queen Gemma and a few magistrates.

Gemma bowed gratefully to the other queen, who appeared to be twenty years younger than she was. "I'm very sorry for asking you to come. We simply cannot discover what's caused this…"

"It's no trouble at all. Tuldarr has a duty to accept requests like this. May we make haste and see King Hubert right away?" asked Tinasha.

"Of course. Please follow me," Gemma replied, lifting her heavy skirts and turning on her heel. The group from Tuldarr followed her into the palace.

Magdalsia's castle was not large or luxurious, but it was crafted thoughtfully from good-quality materials. Unfortunately, the king's unexplained coma meant the structure was filled with a distinct sense of unease.

Tinasha was musing to herself that she wouldn't know if she could help until she inspected the king, when Gemma suddenly came to a halt in front of the entrance to the throne room. Tinasha almost tripped over the woman's skirts, though she managed to steady herself with help from a nearby officer.

"Who are you? You're not allowed to be in here!" Gemma barked.

The young woman standing before the throne only smirked, remaining still.

Tinasha peeked over the queen's shoulder. The intruder was a beautiful woman with light-brown curly hair falling to her waist. Her amber eyes were striking and sparkled with provocative intent. Her arms were crossed, with a paper held between the fingers of one hand.

"Nice to meet you, Gemma. No need to worry about the king. He's only sleeping," the woman greeted them.

"I asked you who you are!" shrilled the queen.

"I'm Lucia. I'll be filling in for the king while he's asleep."

“Filling in…?”

Lucia gave a half smile and flicked the piece of paper in her hands. It floated through the air and landed in Gemma’s grasp. She glanced down at it, and within a matter of seconds, her hands began to tremble.

“No… This can’t be…”

“It’s the king’s handwriting, isn’t it? You don’t need to worry about him,” Lucia stated.

The letter outlined that Lucia was someone the king of Magdalsia trusted and that she was to be given full authority while he was immobile. Yet this was still someone Gemma didn’t recognize, a woman of completely unknown origin.

Gemma’s gaze turned harsh, and she stood firm. “If the king is truly in no danger, I will hear it from him and no one else! Move away from there!”

“Gemma, are you really that incapable of grasping a situation?” Lucia questioned in a low tone.

The queen, who carried herself with a deep majesty no ordinary person could possess, drew back. Realizing that she was cowering instinctively, Gemma twisted her face in humiliation. Just as she was about to say something, a door across the room opened, and a man nearing his elder years entered.

Gemma beamed at the sight of him. “Gasparo! Do something about this woman, please.”

The man scanned the room.

Whispering, Tinasha asked, “Who is he?”

“The prime minister. He’s held this position for over twenty years. His Majesty and all the magistrates trust him absolutely, and he will not let some strange girl tell us what to do,” Gemma replied, gazing at the prime minister expectantly.

After letting out a sigh, the prime minister turned to face his queen. “Your Majesty, I deeply apologize, but I cannot obey. Lady Lucia is currently the acting ruler.”

“Excuse me?!”

The entire chamber was thrown into an uproar, excepting Lucia and the prime minister. Sighing again at how severely shaken Queen Gemma was, Gasparo glanced at the door he’d entered from. Two soldiers stepped into the room.

“I understand your concern, Your Majesty, but you should rest for a bit. Soldiers! Escort the queen to her chambers!”

“Wh-what?! Unhand me!”

Ignoring the queen’s protests, the soldiers each took an arm, and she was frog-marched away to her chambers.

The delegation from Tuldarr and the magistrates who had escorted them in were left behind. Pamyra and the Tuldarr officers gawked at the abrupt escalation.

Only Tinasha and Mila were eyeing Lucia pointedly, and Lucia's amber gaze fell upon Tinasha. "So that's how things are. I appreciate that you came all this way, but there's no longer any need. I'll ask you to leave now."

"You're a mage, aren't you?" questioned Tinasha.

"And what if I am?" the woman replied boldly, and Tinasha arched a brow.

She hesitated for two to three seconds before she responded, "May I see the king?"

"No need."

"Because you can't allow us to?" Tinasha returned coldly.

Lucia gave a shallow grin. "The king is not well enough to meet with the Queen of Tuldarr. When the time comes, he will visit you."

"That won't be necessary," said Tinasha, tilting her head to peer suspiciously at the woman on the throne. She honed her concentration to a fine point as colossal amounts of magic pulsed in her body.

That was when she noticed multiple pairs of eyes on her. Soldiers had streamed in from the door in the back, ready and watching.

Their expressions were devoid of emotion. It was clear they would draw their swords on command.

Tinasha relaxed her power. With eyes as cold as ice, she stared at Lucia. "Very well. We will take our leave for today. I do hope we'll meet again soon."

"So sorry I couldn't provide better hospitality," Lucia apologized mockingly, confident of her victory.

Concealing her emotions, Tinasha turned to depart. Her retinue gave her reassuring smiles.

The woman seated on the throne smirked as she watched the ruler of Tuldarr disappear the way she had come.

The party returned to Tuldarr almost immediately after leaving. Renart greeted them with astonishment.

Once in her study, Tinasha dismissed her guards and exhaled hard. "Things do not look good over there…"

"Who in the world *was* that woman?" inquired Pamyra, naturally referring to Lucia.

Tinasha sat in a chair with her knees drawn to her chest. "I don't know if the king really gave her the right to rule, but she's extremely bad news. She has…as much magic as I do, or as much as a witch. It's not normal."

"What…?"

Renart and Pamyra paled. Tinasha sighed over her knees. "I can't believe we ran into such a dangerous person. Oscar will *definitely* not be happy about this."

Mustering courage, Renart finally managed to ask, "Do people with as much magic as witches truly exist?"

“Strictly speaking, Lady Tinasha has more raw magic,” put in Mila. “But power isn’t measured by capacity alone. It’s hard to tell how much of a challenge she would pose, so I think it’s good we retreated for now.”

The spirit made her assertion in a flat yet unhappy tone before floating into the air and taking a seat on top of a bookcase.

In terms of people with abnormal amounts of magic, that fortune-teller Tinasha met the other day certainly qualified, though Lucia was far more hostile. Moreover, Itz had vouched for the fortune-teller.

This mysterious woman who’d popped up in Magdalsia’s court was like no other. Tinasha folded her hands and rested her chin on them. “She means to take the country, doesn’t she?”

“I wonder. Those soldiers looked like they were being mind-controlled. And in that case, she could have complete domination almost overnight,” Mila replied.

“She really showed us up, right at the end of the year and everything,” Tinasha muttered.

Tinasha would have preferred to evacuate Gemma, at the very least, but a chance hadn’t presented itself. Had she forced it, she could have at best sparked a battle of spells with Lucia or, at worst, started a political scandal.

Lifting her head, Tinasha glanced over at Pamyra and Renart. “I want to…get rid of her, I’m pretty sure…”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea…”

Her followers preferred Tinasha to leave the situation be, so long as it brought no harm to Tuldarr. However, no one knew what the future might bring. Unsure of what to say, all fell silent for a moment.

Tinasha stared up at the ceiling. “Because of how powerful she is, I’d like to come up with a bit of a strategy for going up against her. Phaedra got the better of me with a particularly nasty type of spell, after all.”

“But this Lucia is human, isn’t she? She wasn’t a demon or anything.”

“Hmm… I don’t think she’s a witch,” Tinasha mused.

Of the three witches in the world, Tinasha knew who one of them was—her fiancé’s own grandmother.

It couldn’t have been Lavinia, which left two others.

“The Witch of the Water or the Witch of the Forbidden Forest, huh? I’ve never met either.”

“You might be able to get some answers if you questioned all the spirits. The Witch of the Water was the one with invisible spells, right?”

“That’s what people say, yes. I really don’t want to face her,” Tinasha replied.

Skilled mages could camouflage their spells and make them invisible to other casters. If Tinasha herself felt like doing so, she could make it so an ordinary mage wouldn’t see a spell of hers. Invisibility was fairly labor-intensive, however, and it’d have no effect on someone who rivaled her strength.

According to legends passed down in Tuldarr, all of the magic the Witch of the Water used made her spells and their results completely undetectable. Her opponents would fall in defeat, having never seen the blow coming. Were that true, she'd be a fearsome opponent.

"And the Witch of the Forbidden Forest specializes in psychological magic. I wouldn't want to fight her, either," Tinasha remarked.

Mila gave a disgusted shudder. "Demons are weak to high levels of psychological magic, so that's even worse than the Witch of the Water for me."

Unlike humans, whose souls and minds were closely linked to their physical bodies, high-ranking demons were formless spirits merely clothing themselves in bodies as conceptual manifestations. This meant that demons were more susceptible to strong psychological spells than humans, and the same was true for curses. The fierce curses of the Witch of Silence had rendered them all powerless instantly.

Resting her cheek in one hand, Tinasha felt her thoughts racing.

While she had built up her magical resistance since she was young, there was no way of knowing how prepared she was to face a witch. An ordinary human who hadn't undergone such training would be no match for a witch at all. She didn't even know if her fiancé would come out victorious against such an opponent.

"I'm stumped…"

The queen leaned back in her chair with her arms folded behind her head and sighed deeply.

※

With only a week to go until the end of the year, people in every country were drowning under piles of work.

Oscar rushed to complete his duties and made his habitual visit to his fiancée an hour earlier than usual.

Half a day had passed since she'd informed him of her trip to Magdalsia. He hoped her lack of contact since meant there were no major issues, but he worried regardless.

"Is she not back yet?"

Tinasha's bedchamber was dark and empty, with only a candle flickering on the table. Perhaps she hadn't returned yet. As Oscar was deliberating over whether to wait or go out looking for her, he heard the door behind him opening and whirled around.

A ray of light cut across the room.

"Oscar? You're here early," Tinasha said, coming in from the bathroom and cocking her head to find him there. Droplets of water dripped from her black hair, which was piled into a bun. Steam wafted from her body as she padded over to him on bare feet, clad in only a white towel.

He eyed her incredulously. “You’re getting the floor all wet. Dry yourself off before you come in.”

“Oh…I’ll do that,” she said, wrapping her hair in the other towel she’d brought as she glanced behind her. All it took was one look, and the water on the floor evaporated into thin air; she hadn’t even said an incantation. Noticing that the droplets beading on her creamy, taut skin were also disappearing, Oscar was amazed. He stroked a line from the nape of her neck down her spine.

“Waugh! What do you think you’re doing?!” Tinasha yelped, letting out a strange cry as she jumped back.

Oscar looked down at his hand and marveled. “Your skin’s not hot at all. And here I thought you were drying it using heat.”

“I’d die if I did that! The spell only affects water!”

“Gotcha. That’s pretty handy,” he commented.

“Unbelievable… That tickled, you know.” Tinasha pouted, quivering with anger. Then she let down her hair and began to dry that, too. Oscar gave her a flat look before he reached out to lift her into his arms and moved to sit on the edge of the bed, settling her on his lap.

She gazed up at him innocently. “Aren’t your clothes going to get wet?”

“I don’t care,” he stated, drinking in the floral scent wafting faintly off her soft body. She had never felt shy or wary around him in intimate situations, and that hadn’t changed since their engagement.

Savoring the virtually inescapable pull of her unusually warm frame and flushed skin, Oscar let his eyes close.

Tinasha dried her hair quickly, perhaps conscious of how she was dampening Oscar’s outfit. After only a moment, she was completely dry, as was the towel wrapped around her. She teleported a comb over to her and started to brush her locks.

“You’ve been pretty well-behaved lately,” Oscar commented.

“That’s because you’re always getting upset with me!”

“Which is a result of your love for poking your nose into absolutely everything,” he shot back. Tinasha stuck out her tongue at him childishly but didn’t refute his point. She knew that Oscar’s many annoying warnings came from a place of love.

Oscar pressed a kiss to her bare shoulder. “Our wedding is only a short while after the new year. Why don’t you move to Farsas early? It won’t be so different from having our rooms connected.”

“What? But you’re the one who’s always complaining about how hard it is to get me to wake up in the mornings!”

“I’ll wake you up anyway,” he said. It was hardly a sacrifice if it meant making Tinasha his bride at once. He had held himself back this entire time, aware that taking her chastity would mean weakening her spiritual magic, but things had been peaceful for a while, and she was behaving herself. Surely, they didn’t have to wait until after the wedding.

Tinasha appeared confused at how quickly Oscar had responded. She tossed her hair over one shoulder and made to stand. “All right, I’m going to go get dressed.”

“You can stay like that,” Oscar replied, holding her down on his waist. He tipped up her chin and pressed a deep kiss to her lips.

She was so hot to the touch that he felt like he would melt. He knew that a good half of that heat had to come from her emotions. He wanted to melt her down to her core and pick out the most constant and true part of her. He would do it over and over. And he sensed that she desired to do the same to him.

Oscar whispered into her ear, “Tell me you don’t want this, and I’ll stop. You have to tell me now.”

Tinasha had consented in the past, but that was then and this was now. If she didn’t want it, he would back off. Yet he desired her so intensely that his reason was beginning to fail.

He rubbed his thumb over her bare kneecap, feeling the smoothness of her skin as he slid his hand up along her thigh, hidden under the towel. Releasing her chin, he gazed down at her, finding her lips bitten as red as a flower petal.

“I…I’m not…going to stop you…”

Her dark eyes brimmed with innocence, surrendering to everything and practically liquid with emotion. That look of hers made him dizzy, and he smiled. He kissed a line down her neck, his ardent passion ruling him entirely.

“But Oscar?” she called, her voice the tiniest bit tremulous.

“What?”

“I need to tell you something. You’ll be upset if I tell you later,” she panted, although her voice also carried an edge to it. A bad feeling took root in Oscar’s stomach. Tinasha’s long eyelashes fluttered as she closed her eyes.

“Tell me, then,” he said.

“I—I might need to fight an enemy who’s as strong as a witch,” she confessed.

“……”

Night had fallen completely in the queen’s bedchamber—a heavy, almost tangible silence blanketed its two occupants.

After letting out a very long sigh, Oscar lifted Tinasha and settled her next to him. With his eyes squeezed shut against the headache boring at his temples, he clapped her on the shoulder. “Go get dressed, then we’ll talk.”

“Umm, but it’s really all right. I have plenty of magic, so I can figure something out even without my chastity…”

“Put on some clothes! I was a fool to let down my guard!”

“Sorry,” Tinasha muttered as she headed for her closet. While she was doing that, Oscar helped himself to a glass of one of the liqueurs from her shelf. He had never touched any of the bottles without her permission first,

but desperate times called for desperate measures. He wanted a distraction from his own irrational behavior; he was furious with himself for the selfish indulgence.

"What if I go my whole life never getting to touch her?" he murmured, and it didn't seem all that implausible. If the two of them allowed her personal safety to outweigh the need for heirs, if they didn't trust in their own power, that future could very well become a reality.

It was too early to worry about that, however. For now, Oscar had merely lost all desire to cross that line with her until after the wedding. He was taking a sip of bitter liqueur when Tinasha returned wearing a black, long-sleeved dress that trailed along the floor behind her. Sweeping the skirts up, she sat down across from him with a dejected look on her face.

Oscar got right down to business. "So, who's this opponent that's as strong as a witch? How have things reached this point?"

"It's a long story, but…"

Tinasha gave a clear and concise explanation. Oscar frowned as he took everything in.

A mysterious woman with as much magic as a witch had appeared out of nowhere and taken over a country, albeit a minor one. The facts alone were highly irregular.

But for the time being, this was all another country's problem. "As long as no harm comes to us, you should leave it alone."

"Renart said the same thing," Tinasha replied. "But we don't know what her motives are. Magdalsia is Tuldarr's neighbor, so depending on how things go, we may want to strike as soon as possible."

Magdalsia and Farsas did not share a border, but Farsas was much closer to it than Gandona in terms of distance between the two capitals, with Tuldarr between the route connecting them.

Resisting the urge to put his feet up on the table, Oscar took another sip. "Why Magdalsia? There's nothing there."

"Yes, that's true. There's only untamed nature."

"Have you asked the other spirits if she's a witch?"

"Yes…"

Before Oscar's eyes, Tinasha veritably wilted, anxiety and worry casting a pall over her face. The king of Farsas raised an eyebrow.

Tinasha brushed her bangs from her face. "Actually, I've met the Witch of the Water."

"You *did*? So you've fought against her, too?" Oscar questioned, appalled that this was his first time hearing of it.

Tinasha shook her head, a mysterious look on her face. "No. Do you remember when I mentioned the unerring fortune-teller? I had her tell my fortune after Itz introduced me to her. I believe she's the Witch of the Water."

"What in the world…?"

“Itz told me in confidence that the Witch of the Water is apparently a blood relative to the founding king of Tuldarr. But as that came to light only after he abdicated the throne to the next generation and left the country, only three of the spirits know her. I can vouch for all of them, though. I only wish Itz had told me sooner,” she grumbled.

That left only one witch. “What about the Witch of the Forbidden Forest, then? Do none of the spirits know about her?”

“One does… But he’s missing at the moment.”

“That’s possible?”

“This has never happened before. I didn’t think it ever could,” Tinasha said, slumping over the table.

Oscar frowned. He knew the spirits were more than familiars to her—they were her friends. Of course she would be depressed with one of them missing.

“In that case, it’s pretty likely that we’re dealing with the Witch of the Forbidden Forest.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Two major incidents have occurred simultaneously. You should definitely be considering if they’re linked. If that spirit were around, he could tell you whether the woman in Magdalsia is a witch, couldn’t he?”

“That’s…true. Does that mean she could have silenced him?!”

“I’m just saying it’s possible. I don’t know for sure,” Oscar replied, forcibly cutting himself off there. There was a lot he didn’t know about witches, and even more he didn’t understand about the mystical spirits, who were high-ranking demons. “Is there anything in any records about the witches?” he inquired.

Surely Tuldarr’s vast archives held some clue, no matter how small. Tinasha put her hand to her chin and hummed. “Hmm, they’ve mostly been treated as abominations. No one was in the habit of recording their names or physical descriptions, even if those facts were known. Leonora—the witch I killed—only entered the records after her death.”

“Gotcha.”

“If anyone knows, it’ll be Travis…or Lavinia,” Tinasha said, aware that both were shrewd and crafty. She didn’t want to go near Travis, despite knowing where he lived, and Lavinia’s whereabouts were unknown.

That prompted Oscar to recall that he’d asked his father about inviting Lavinia to the wedding. *“Do whatever you want,”* his father had answered with a weak look. Perhaps he had some idea as to where the witch resided.

“I’ll contact Lavinia. *Don’t* go to Travis,” Oscar stated.

“What? Are you sure you want to do that?”

“Eh, it’ll be fine. And if you start hatching any plans, tell me about them first. Same goes if this Lucia comes to you. You need to let me know as soon as you can.”

Tinasha thought on that. “What about making the first move?”

“You’re unbelievable…”

According to her story, the witch hadn’t done anything yet. There was no reason for a preemptive strike.

However, Tinasha looked truly puzzled by Oscar’s reaction. “But why shouldn’t we? A witch is capable of waging war against an entire country.”

That reminded Oscar of one of Tinasha’s nicknames—the Witch Killer Queen.

During the war with Tayiri four hundred years ago, Tinasha had battled a witch and the Tayiri army at once.

Her words were incongruous with her sweet face, but Tinasha continued, ignorant of that. “The reason why the remaining witches and the mainland’s political powers maintain a tacit nonintervention agreement with one another is because the witches have never used their power to get involved in conflicts between countries. If they were to incite a nation to start a war, that would be the equivalent of battling two full countries at once. We can’t afford to let this go. We should take action before they have a chance to prepare themselves.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but we’d be landing ourselves in a quagmire if we crossed that line. The impact on the mainland would be…”

Oscar trailed off, struck by the look in Tinasha’s dark eyes. It was the countenance of a queen, the same one he had witnessed several times before.

This was the first time, however, he glimpsed a peculiar, overwhelming force there. It was the bottomless depths of the abyss itself, swallowing up everything with a contemptuous, domineering glare.

That look said that she would show not a shred of mercy to an enemy, that she was a mage capable of killing a witch.

Curbing her power now might be the best course after all, Oscar thought.

That flash of insight drifted through his mind. Perhaps it was not wise to leave her as a chaste spirit sorcerer able to wield boundless amounts of magic. While this thought was born from neither love nor lust, he brushed it aside immediately.

Such a notion was unbecoming of Tinasha’s husband. It had occurred to him as the ruler of Farsas.

Therefore, he thought it wrong to consider such thoughts.

Oscar did his best to maintain his usual expression and keep his voice sounding normal. “Anyway, it wouldn’t be good. You always overdo it right out of the gate. I’d be in a very difficult position if something happened, so you should rethink that. It makes me very uneasy.”

“Fine,” Tinasha said, accepting this with a huff. Still, she blushed, undoubtedly happy that he was worried about her.

That reassured Oscar. He reached out and stroked her hair. “You really have no shortage of irritating enemies.”

“That’s the sort of country Tuldarr is. We settle magical situations gone wrong,” she replied, aware that Oscar also got drawn into all manner of

troublesome matters by dint of being the Akashia swordsman. Now that he was marrying Tinasha, he might find himself constantly at war, even after they were wed.

But he didn't intend to lose, no matter who came at them.

It was not mere pride that made Oscar believe firmly that there was no predicament they couldn't overcome.

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Valt always made the first move.

The world was a tangle of the known and the unknown. Each time it repeated, the known grew larger, but the unknown never vanished. The world would undulate and smack him with another shape. For someone like him, who walked through time, the present seemed no different from a dream.

So much of it was absurd, illogical. All that he could remember were the hopes that had been betrayed.

Valt had even engaged in self-harm, sick of the growing wounds on his soul. However, he'd quickly reminded himself that it wouldn't change anything. On occasion, he'd wished to forget everything, and on others, he sought to hasten his own demise, as his father had.

But as the world continued to repeat, and he absorbed its distortions and warping inside himself, there came to dwell within him a darkness as clear as a lake on a windless night. Sunk at its bottom were mountains of resignation, remorse, and hatred. They could not be seen from the surface, which reflected only the azure moon shining in the heavens.

Would this be the time for those emotions to function as a trump card?

"I'm really in it this time. No matter how long I try, I can't settle these miscalculations. I didn't expect there to be a barrier *inside* the mirror, too, or for all of this to happen."

"Perhaps it's because you were greedy," offered Miralys, glaring coldly at him.

"I'm ashamed of myself," Valt confessed, shrinking back in the face of her glower.

He dropped his gaze to the map of the mainland spread on the table. Sighing, he stared at the words *Tuldarr*, *Farsas*, and *Magdalsia*, the last of which was written smaller.

"All we needed was to have the king of Magdalsia touch the outsiders' artifact while in a coma, but it looks like only half of the mirror activated. And one hell of a ruler has claimed the throne in his absence. I guess it's partly because we've had so many first-time clashes this go-round. Who would've thought it'd turn into such a pain?"

"You reap what you sow," Miralys commented mercilessly, sitting on her chair with her knees drawn up and a stormy expression on her face.

“I’m sorry.” Valt gave her a brief, terribly fond look, then glanced away. “Well, it’s all right, I have many pieces on my board. I’ll get things going here first,” he said with a wink, pointing to the picture of Farsas Castle on the map.

※

The Farsas new year festivities went off without a hitch. Oscar waved to the people as he paraded through the streets on his way back from the temple, protected by airtight security, then returned to his chambers. Ordinarily, that would be when he visited Tinasha, but Tuldarr’s new year festivities began at dawn, not at night like in Farsas. That was when the ruler would give a speech to the populace. Waking up was not the queen’s strong suit, so she would likely be going to bed extra early. He couldn’t bring himself to disturb her slumber.

While his schedule had been a busy one up until now, it would only grow more so with the new year. In two weeks, there was a founding day celebration in Gandona, and Tinasha’s abdication and Oscar’s wedding to her was another two weeks after that.

Even Oscar found it too hectic, but such responsibilities came with the territory of being king. And unlike the Gandona revelries, which he had no desire to attend, he was hoping to move up the wedding. He certainly wasn’t complaining about what the near future would bring.

As he shrugged off his jacket, he spoke to the air around him. “Nothing happened, so you can go back now.”

After a moment, a shocked-sounding girl’s voice responded, “You knew I was here?”

“I felt someone watching me. Did Tinasha order you to do this?”

“Yes,” replied a red-haired girl as she materialized close to the ceiling. This was the only spirit of the twelve who had been with Tinasha before her coronation, and the one Oscar knew best—Mila.

He asked her, “Did you find the spirit who went missing?”

“No. He hasn’t returned to our realm. If only he were here to confirm whether we’re dealing with a witch.”

“Did he and this witch once have a battle or something?”

“Actually, I’ve heard they were lovers, though it was a long time ago,” Mila explained.

“Oh yeah? So more than four hundred years ago, huh?”

Oscar sank into a chair, poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher, and took a sip. He glanced up at the spirit on the ceiling. “In that case, is it possible he’s betrayed Tinasha and gone back to the witch?”

“Absolutely not. High-ranking demons cannot break the contracts that cause them to manifest. If the witch used her power to force him into doing so, Lady Tinasha would be immediately aware that the agreement was broken. The same would be true if he died.”

“So he’s not dead, but he can’t do anything.”

“More than likely. I wish he hadn’t acted on his own and spared Lady Tinasha the worry,” Mila spat. Evidently, her master was more important to her than another spirit.

Oscar set his water glass on the table. “How freely can spirits act?”

“Hmm, well, we can’t appear unless summoned. That can keep us from helping our master, too, even if she’s in mortal danger.”

“That’s pretty strict.”

“Those are the terms of the contract. The first king set them when he made the pact. To put it bluntly, we avoid getting trampled by politics, and we are allowed the freedom of our own judgment. To put it nicely, it means humans handle their own affairs. Ultimately, we’re just tools at Lady Tinasha’s beck and call. The difference in power between ordinary humans and us is just too great, so doesn’t it make sense for us to have restraints?”

Oscar did not answer Mila’s question. The first person who came to mind when Mila mentioned a vast power disparity was his fiancée.

“However, we can go wherever we please when our master doesn’t need us. Of course, we can’t engage in battle or anything, but we can certainly poke around here and there. Although up until now, none of us have made it a point to do anything like that,” Mila grumbled bitterly, sounding very much like she blamed the other spirit for his situation.

Oscar crossed his legs and picked up the letter he’d set on the table. It was a reply to one of his own.

“Let’s put that aside for a moment. Here’s where our next clue about the witch is going to come from. Looks like she got my letter, even though I sent it lacking knowledge of her address. This is Lavinia’s reply.”

The missive, which was only a reply to Oscar’s inquiry and nothing more, included the name and physical appearance of the Witch of the Forbidden Forest, as well as a brief description of her personality and abilities.

Mila’s face darkened as she listened to Oscar read the letter aloud. “Oh, what in the…? So it probably is her. Lucrezia is Lucia, huh? I see.”

“From the way Lavinia describes it, the Witch of the Forbidden Forest doesn’t seem the type to have any interest in politics. I wonder what’s going on here,” Oscar said.

“Who knows? You humans are always changing—that’s probably all it is. Anyway, it’s the part about her being a psychological mage that I don’t like.”

“What? Is that something you can’t handle?”

“Nope, not from her. Anything cast by a regular mage would be fine.”

“Gotcha. I see how it is,” Oscar replied, folding the letter and placing it in his jacket pocket.

Mila must have decided the conversation was over, because she gave a nominal good-bye and vanished.

Once he was confident the spirit had left, Oscar locked the letter from his grandmother in a drawer. He didn't want Tinasha to know its contents, even a detail that might be obvious to her.

At the end of Lavinia's curt letter, she had written, You can't fight psychological magic, so be a good boy and let her do it.

※

The first three days of the new year passed in the blink of an eye.

On the evening of the third day, the sky was clear, and its blue tone deepened each hour.

Lazar made his way down the hall, glancing outside the castle windows at a sky that had reached the exact shade of Oscar's eyes. That was probably why he ran straight into someone who had just rounded the corner ahead of him. Flustered, he quickly moved out of the way to the right.

He adjusted his grip on his papers and was about to apologize when he froze. "L-Lady Zefiria…"

"It's been a long time, Lazar," she said, curtsying to him gracefully.

Lazar knew her well. She had a mind like a steel trap and eyes that were somewhat cold, perhaps owing to the time she'd spent outside of Farsas before coming to live with her noble father. While her smile was placid, her disinterest in everything was unnerving, enough so that it may have even troubled Oscar.

But she was also someone who was not permitted to be here now. Lazar stared at her searchingly. "Do you have business in the castle?"

"I'd like to wish the king a happy new year. Where is he?" Zefiria asked, twirling a strand of golden hair around her finger.

Finding something alarming in her beautiful blue eyes, Lazar held his breath for a moment before replying, "I'm very sorry, but I cannot tell you. I shall give your regards to him myself and will have to ask you to please take your leave."

"Oh, how cold of you. It isn't as if I'm going to eat him alive."

"How you jest, my lady. Didn't the king tell you himself that there was no need for you to wish him anything ever?"

"Did he? Well, if you won't tell me, I'll search for him myself. You don't have the authority to send me away," she said with a mocking smile.

Lazar drew himself up straight. "It isn't a matter of authority. I am saying this as his friend. Please depart."

"Is this because he and I used to be intimate?"

"Lady Zefiria!" fumed Lazar, red in the face, and Zefiria let out a tinkling laugh.

Only a few people knew about her and Oscar, including Lazar, the king's friend since childhood. Zefiria's father and others may have sensed what was going on, but they did not discuss it openly.

Lazar broke out in a cold sweat at the mention of this woman. Her relationship with Oscar had been over since Tinasha's arrival in Farsas, and it should have remained a buried secret.

In three hours, Tinasha would arrive for a briefing session on the wedding. Lazar wanted Zefiria gone before then at any cost, and if possible, he did not wish for Oscar to see her, either.

Without taking his eyes off Zefiria for a moment, Lazar asked a probing question to try and glean her true motives. "What are you after?"

"Oh, nothing, I'm simply having fun. If you're so eager to know, why not play along?"

Provocative words. A bewitching smile. Lazar scowled as he sensed something ominous there. And as he did, someone approached from behind and abruptly struck him on the back. The surprise almost made his heart stop.

Before Lazar could turn to see the culprit, he collapsed in the hallway.

※

Oscar, who was in his study and had just finished the last of his paperwork, frowned when he realized Lazar hadn't returned. It had already been half an hour since he'd left to drop off some documents with Nessan, the minister of the interior. That errand shouldn't have taken this long.

When Oscar opened the door to the hallway, eyes narrowed suspiciously, he found a lady-in-waiting about to knock. She apologized for her rudeness and informed Oscar that Lazar was waiting for him in the king's private chambers.

"In my chambers? That doesn't make sense," Oscar said. Even Lazar, his longtime friend, could not enter those rooms without permission. Tinasha was authorized to do so, but she wouldn't enter when Oscar was absent.

Puzzling over that incomprehensible message, Oscar hastened to his chambers and flung the door open once he had arrived.

Lazar wasn't there.

Instead, he found a woman standing by the window, the waxing moon at her back. When she noticed Oscar's arrival, she looked to him slowly. With a graceful smile on her lips, she dipped into a curtsy.

"I apologize for the long silence," she greeted him.

"Why are you here? Where is Lazar?"

"Lazar? I don't know. Perhaps the lady-in-waiting got her message mixed up?" she replied with faux innocence, and Oscar swore under his breath.

Zefiria couldn't call him here herself, so she'd used Lazar's name. The king's mood plummeted upon realizing he'd fallen for such a foolish trick.

"What are you doing here? Are you in trouble?" he demanded, concerned for Zefiria despite his anger.

A look of terrible sadness came over the woman's face for just a moment before it vanished. She walked over to the table and picked up a small bottle resting on it.

"My mother's winery has produced a fruit wine this year that is the best vintage yet. I've come to invite you to taste it," she explained, pouring the red liquid into a glass and stepping over to Oscar to hand it to him.

He received it and stared at the liquid. "Is that really why you're here? Don't hold back. Just come out and say it."

"That's really all it is. Please, enjoy the wine," Zefiria said with a beautiful, clear voice.

Oscar lifted the glass up to the moonlight and put his lips to its rim. Ultimately, he set it back down on the table without taking a sip. "Sorry. I'll have some later."

"Oh? What's wrong?"

"It isn't that I don't trust you, but I can't be too careful lately. Forgive me."

"I don't mind," Zefiria assured him, smiling and taking a step closer and reaching out for Oscar. "Very soon, you'll be married. Congratulations."

"Mm-hmm."

"Farsas will flourish with this tie to Tuldarr. You are the very image of a king, Your Majesty." Invisible thorns barbed Zefiria's words, and Oscar scowled.

He caught hold of her wrist as she extended her arm toward him. "Like I told you before, I didn't choose her for her status. I like her for who she is. I don't know what you're thinking, but keep the gossip to yourself."

The woman only laughed in response. She gazed up at Oscar, eyes filled with chaotic, whirling emotions.

Oscar's voice grew more chilling. "Zefiria, what have you done with Lazar?"

"I told you, I don't know."

"Then why hasn't he returned, and why did you use his name to bring me here?"

"I merely borrowed his name. I don't know where he is," she asserted. Her face claimed ignorance, yet her voice felt barbed. Oscar made a face at how vague she was being.

Zefiria had never been one to reveal her emotions. She had long maintained a coldness about her, as if she were using her keen mind to keep a calculated view of everything. Perhaps it was that aspect of her—so similar to Oscar's—that had garnered his interest. However, she had remained the same all while they'd seen each other and even upon their separation. Now, for the first time, he began to see the sharp edges lurking in that smile.

Zefiria laughed, her eyes inscrutable. "I actually have one request."

"What?"

"I want you, Your Majesty."

“You can’t have me. Give up,” Oscar replied immediately, rejecting that request that reeked like a poison flower. They’d been lovers in the past, but the relationship had never been romantic. Neither Oscar nor Zefiria took advantage of their statuses to claim the other. They’d simply approved of each other and met on occasion.

Her perceptiveness, which Oscar had once appreciated, now possessed a strange hue. Zefiria clearly enjoyed Oscar’s suspicion of her. She wriggled her hand out of his grasp. “I’ll abandon hope, then. But in exchange…”

Sharp pain lanced through Oscar’s right hand, the one that had been gripping Zefiria’s wrist, and he yanked it back. Glancing down, he saw that it was oozing blood, as if pierced by a thin blade.

Reflexively, the king wrenched Zefiria’s hand up. Pain twisted her expression, yet her smile remained gleeful. “In exchange, I shall betray you.”

Upon those words, Oscar’s vision went dark.

Everything grew very distant.

His consciousness slipped into darkness.

As he crumpled to the floor, Zefiria gazed down at him fondly.

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Tinasha arrived in Farsas about twenty minutes sooner than scheduled, carrying a spell book that her friend Sylvia had asked for.

Now that Tinasha was about to become her queen, Sylvia had regretfully decided to stop asking her questions about magic. Tinasha wished for their friendship to remain as it always had and insisted Sylvia make as many requests as she liked.

Tinasha asked a mage she passed in the hallway where Sylvia was and was told she waited in the outer gardens. Dusk was falling, and once Tinasha located Sylvia, she discovered that fellow court mages Doan and Kav were also there, drawing a magic circle by the light of magical lamps.

“What are you doing?” asked Tinasha.

“Oh, Queen Tinasha! We’re trying to create a transportation array with a variable destination that can be changed each time you want to use it. I thought it might be useful in times when there isn’t a lot of space to set up multiple arrays,” explained Sylvia.

Tinasha stood next to the three and examined their work. “Hmm, sounds interesting.” The configuration was fairly well crafted, owing to the efforts of the trio. “Excellent job. But the destination can only be changed by those who can work magic. You’d need to output it to a magic implement or something.”

“I know… I’d like to make it simpler, though.” Sylvia sighed.

“You could create a crystal for every destination, give each a unique name, and define them in the spell configuration. That would allow the

destination to shift, depending on the crystal fitted into the array. It would require some adjusting of the spell, however."

"Ooh, I see!" said Sylvia, accepting the book Tinasha brought her with gratitude.

The large transportation arrays permanently installed in the castle could not be combined into one, as it was sometimes necessary to depart for multiple locations simultaneously. Still, this invention could be used for simple configurations installed in people's rooms. Once implemented, getting around the castle might become a lot easier.

As the three mages fell into serious thought, Tinasha giggled and waved her hand at them. "Oh, but then you'd have to put chains or something on the crystal to prevent removal. And you'd be in trouble if you ever lost one."

"Ooh, that could definitely happen… I can see people walking away with them by mistake," Sylvia agreed.

Tinasha stared at the magic circle. "This really is well crafted. You've designed it to utilize minimal magic for maintenance, and when it's activated, it will absorb magic in the area and amplify it. While that means it wouldn't work without enough latent energy nearby, you'd just need to place it carefully, and it would work as a hidden array."

Sylvia nodded. "We arranged it so that it could be used even in places without any mages."

"Now that you've pointed that out, this really is an extraordinary idea," Tinasha remarked.

For Tinasha and Tuldarr, the concept of "not enough magic or mages" was somewhat foreign. No Tuldarr mage would have considered a way to keep a magic circle going on minimal magic. However, a concept like this would be useful in places where mages were scarce. Likewise, there was the fact that when mages battled one another, hidden magic and spells were often used, meaning that it was worth researching to see whether this could be adapted into a magic circle for long-term use. Tinasha crossed her arms, falling deep into thought.

Aware that if he let her go on, she would ponder it all night, Doan said, "Queen Tinasha, aren't you here for the meeting about your wedding ceremony?"

"Oh, yes, I'd completely forgotten. I suppose Oscar's in his study?"

"If you're looking for the king, I know where he is," purred an unfamiliar voice from behind her, and Tinasha whirled around. So did the other three mages.

It was not a lady-in-waiting who spoke but an upper-class woman in an elegant dress.

Tinasha bobbed her head to her and asked, "Could you tell me?"

"Oh, I don't know. It wouldn't be any fun if I revealed it right away, would it?" drawled the woman, making no secret of how much she was enjoying this.

Tinasha frowned. When she glanced at Doan, she found him pale. He hissed. “That’s Zefiria, daughter of Duke Jost.”

“I see… It’s nice to meet you. My name is Tinasha of Tuldarr.”

“I am Zefiria. It is an honor to make your acquaintance. This is my first time seeing you from up close. You really are lovely. I can certainly see why the king is so captivated,” said Zefiria, her tone dripping with derisive scorn rather than prickly barbs.

Unsure of how to respond, Tinasha scratched her temple. From the corner of her eye, she saw that Doan’s expression looked just as grim as it had once in the past. She racked her memory and soon recalled when that last time was.

He’d made this same face the last time Tinasha faced off against an unknown woman in Farsas Castle. It had been the king’s mistress on the previous occasion.

Tinasha clapped her hands together in recognition. “Are you Oscar’s lover?”

Her question was so indifferent that it made the three mages tense. Kav’s and Sylvia’s jaws dropped in shock, while Doan went truly white. Their reactions confirmed Tinasha’s hunch.

Zefiria narrowed her eyes and smiled patronizingly. As if Tinasha were some underperforming student, she replied, “My… I had heard you were quite an aloof young lady, but you are surprisingly astute.”

“Yes, although I won’t deny that I can be dense at times,” Tinasha answered, giving Zefiria a sardonic grin.

Tinasha lacked Oscar’s keen intuition. In fact, she was rather thickheaded for a lady of royalty. But that was when it came to emotional matters in her private life; as a public figure, Tinasha was extremely shrewd.

Presently, Tinasha was carefully ascertaining whether this sudden visitor expected to interact with her on a private or a public level. She could certainly denounce Zefiria for her rudeness; perhaps that was what she *should* do. But too much was unknown about the situation for her to do that.

Doan whispered softly to Tinasha, “It’s ancient history now. The king hasn’t seen her since proposing to you.”

“I surmised that much. I can’t go getting upset over every past dalliance. There would be no end of it,” she muttered back with a bitter smile on her lips, which visibly reassured the mage trio. Naturally, Tinasha was a *little* irritated, but her wedding to Oscar was just around the corner. She couldn’t involve Oscar’s subjects in her feelings, nor did she want him to scold her for causing a fuss.

After composing herself, Tinasha projected an air of calm on the surface as she faced Zefiria head-on and met her gaze.

With four pairs of eyes upon her, Zefiria tapped a finger to her chin. “Unfortunately, I know the king much better than you do.”

“Is that so? I don’t know a thing about that man.”

“I’m surprised that you’re marrying him, then.”

“I love him.”

Zefiria sneered. “Really? What makes you believe you haven’t just imprinted on him?” It was a direct provocation. Tinasha knew Zefiria had come to start a fight.

Her face darkened, but ultimately, her lips curled in a faint smile. “I suppose when we first met, I only adored him the way a child might. But the man I longed for when I was younger was not the one for me. The love of my life is the Oscar with me now, the one who’s vexing and mean to me.”

The Oscar she’d met in the past had lavished her with affection.

Her fiancé was not like that. He teased and scolded her; he stood by her while never holding back. That was proof that they held equal positions and that he saw her for who she was.

Tinasha’s eyes drifted shut in her reverie; then, with a sudden inhale, she opened them. All of the daunting power of the abyss filled her dark gaze. A cruel smile played about her lips. “So tell me, who has bribed you to come? I would so love to know.”

A different sort of tension shot through the air. The court mages held their breaths.

No mere jealous ex-lover would turn up before Tinasha and label her love for Oscar as false. Zefiria must have been informed of the queen’s past.

Eyes flashing, Tinasha fixed a stare as cold as ice on the other woman. However, Zefiria only looked a little astonished by the sudden change that had come over the queen, before her facade returned. She clasped her hands before her heart, smiling. “I do so apologize if I’ve offended you. I heard about it all directly from His Majesty.”

“From Oscar?”

“Yes. If you like, you can ask him yourself? His Majesty is in his bedroom. Oh, but he just fell asleep,” Zefiria said with elegance and scorn. That managed to needle at Tinasha’s emotions.

Logically, she knew that Oscar wouldn’t allow any woman besides his fiancée into his bedchamber. He wouldn’t. Still, her eyes flashed dangerously, and she couldn’t stop the low growl in her voice as she spat out, “What do you mean?”

“Precisely what I said, Your Majesty. You claimed you wouldn’t get upset about past affairs, but…what about current ones?”

Tinasha heard someone gulp, yet she couldn’t be sure who it was.

Her thoughts overheated, and her vision warped as her face screwed up into a grimace, as if that would hold the pain at bay.

Zefiria broke into a delighted grin as she observed each and every little fluctuation in Tinasha’s composure. Her laughter rang out across the twilight, echoing unpleasantly. It was the laugh of someone who stirred up other people’s emotions for her own amusement.

Clutching her forehead, Tinasha took a step forward. “Enough. I’m going to go and ask Oscar myself.”

“Ask him? You’re not going to kill him?” the woman mocked with glee, causing the queen’s face to darken further.

Tinasha trusted him. That hadn’t changed.

But…she was still unnerved. Her heart was no longer her own.

It was all so uncomfortable and frustrating that she wanted to burn everything to the ground, an impulse unbecoming of a mage. She had never felt anything when others betrayed her in the past, but when it came to him, she was reduced to an ignorant little girl.

It made her feel truly foolish—but that was all it was.

Tinasha suppressed the warm sludge threatening to swallow her mind. A smile like a flower under the moonlight bloomed across her face. “I…don’t know him as well as you do, it’s true. But I love him much, much more than you think,” she said. Tinasha intended to keep moving forward despite the doubts in her heart. Zefiria did not look furious or unhappy to hear this; she only grinned with eyes narrowed.

Tinasha sidestepped the irksome woman and walked past her, not looking back once as she left.

“Oscar? Can you hear me? Are you alive?” Tinasha called, knocking on his door, but there was no reply. As she deliberated over whether she should teleport inside, she remembered something and called, “Nark, can you hear me?”

The dragon served Oscar, though Tinasha had been its master for a time. After a short wait, a little red dragon came flying in response to Tinasha’s summons. “Go inside and open the door if Oscar’s in there. If he isn’t, come and tell me.”

Oscar’s private rooms should have had a window left open during the day so that Nark could come and go as he liked. The dragon let out a chirp of acknowledgment and flew out a nearby window.

Tinasha waited for a bit before she heard the click of the lock turning as the door opened from the inside. Nark glided over to her, and she patted the creature’s head. “Thank you. Stand guard here. Tell me if someone comes.”

As ordered, Nark remained by the door while Tinasha ventured deeper into the room. Oscar wasn’t there. Only when she entered his bedchamber did she find him, asleep on the mattress. She gasped and ran to check his pulse and breathing.

“He’s alive… Good.” Tinasha let out a held breath.

He was fast asleep. Even Tinasha, who occasionally slept in his bed, rarely caught a glimpse of Oscar resting, as he lay down later and rose earlier than she did. She patted his cheek lightly as she gazed down at his gorgeous face, no emotion in her eyes.

Oscar showed no signs of waking.

“Ugh… I really might kill you for this,” Tinasha muttered, getting onto the bed and mounting him. Reaching out, she wiped away the smudge of

red lipstick on his lips. He was shirtless, revealing numerous red marks and scratches littering his skin. Tinasha eyed them expressionlessly.

It was a very transparent attempt to provoke her. She would be a fool if she let it anger her.

The emotions she couldn't rein in turned to roiling magic. She wanted to gouge out each and every one of those marks, to tear him apart and put him back together.

Considering that Oscar was unconscious, Tinasha could do with him as she desired. She could kill him lovingly. The little girl inside her screamed out that she wanted to.

Tinasha stroked a finger along his neck. Magic seeped out and shattered a glass on the table. Broken shards and wine spilled to the ground, but she paid them no mind at all. She traced a nail along his carotid artery and scratched the mark already on it.

"To let someone do this to you… If you're going to hand yourself over to someone, I will take control."

The cold flame in Tinasha's eyes died as she lowered her gaze and drew near his face. Opening his lips, she kissed him deeply and slipped some of her magic into his body.

Instantly, Tinasha understood that Oscar had fallen into a trap.

He was a light sleeper, so he would have woken up at a knock on his door. In any case, she had come here for an appointment; Oscar wasn't so careless as to forget he had plans and dabble in an affair.

Using her magic to probe throughout his body, Tinasha soon found a spell, just as she'd expected to. With her mouth still pressed to his, Tinasha scowled as she sensed the hex entwined with a complicated spell, likely caused by a potion. Then she recalled that she had seen a very similar hex before, although its caster had been executed.

Why, then, did an almost identical configuration still exist? Tinasha's mind raced to form conclusions.

Then she felt a flicker of magic in the distance. It was a tiny wave rippling out to notify her that something had made contact with one of her barriers, and, of course, it wasn't coming from the protective barrier cast on Oscar.

Tinasha scanned the room. The royal sword, which Oscar always kept with him, was nowhere to be seen.

"Was I deceived? Itz!"

"I am here."

"Keep watch over this man!" Tinasha ordered, and the white-haired old man swept into a bow. "I'll be right back!"

As her fury colored her fine features, Tinasha teleported away.

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Zefiria was a shrewd, dauntless woman.

Valt attempted to cajole her into letting herself be manipulated, but when she saw through his lies, he decided it best to tell her the truth.

He hadn't told her everything, but none of it was false.

She set two conditions: one, that he would not take Akashia away, and two, that Oscar would not be put into any mortal danger. Valt agreed readily. As a mage, he had no need for Akashia, and he certainly didn't want Tinasha holding a grudge against him for killing Oscar.

After Zefiria handed Akashia to Valt, he asked her, partly as a joke, "What would you change if you could go back in time?"

"Hmm… I would find my mother when she was young and tell her to have better taste in men," she replied facetiously, but the remark possibly contained a grain of truth. While Zefiria was proud of who she was, she also detested herself.

Valt chuckled at the complexity of emotions and watched the woman as she left, knowing he would likely never see this person again.

"Ow! If that had taken any longer, it would have melted me to the bone." Valt sighed as he glanced at his hideously burned hand and the royal sword on the ground.

Akashia, the artifact passed down through the Farsas royal family, had the ability to nullify any magic it touched. Valt did not know the exact reason why only the direct descendants of Farsasian royals could wield it. He hadn't expected the hilt and blade to heat up when he took the sword and touched it to a spell configuration.

He healed his hand as he carried a small box out of the Farsas treasure vault. Ordinarily, breaking the wards on the box would alert the queen, but she probably couldn't spare the concern for that at the moment. Even so, he needed to hurry, or someone would notice the fallen guards.

When Valt exited the no-teleportation zone around the treasure vault, he said an incantation and cast a transportation spell. Zefiria had led him inside the castle; to leave, he would cross the wards. He also needed to cast a complicated spell to prevent anyone from tracking him.

Suddenly, Valt detected someone with a very murderous intent behind him. In a voice like the clearest flute, she called, "It's been a while. Where do you think you're going?"

"Well, well… I never thought you'd notice," Valt said, tensing up and turning around. There before him, he found the very embodiment of an abyss of darkness in the form of a beautiful woman, vivid and real. Blue lightning crackled around her right hand, its light flickering against her exquisite features.

Thunder rent the air, though Tinasha didn't appear to be bothered by it at all. She pointed to the box in Valt's hands. "I shall have to ask you to leave that here. Along with yourself."

"Mmm. While that *is* an enticing proposition, I'm afraid I already have a girl waiting for me," Valt said with a smile, drawing back his left leg as a small crystal tumbled from the hem of his pants.

Her gazed fixed squarely on him, Tinasha narrowed her eyes, so black that no emotion could be discerned. “Then die.”

Lightning erupted, but as it did, Valt kicked the crystal up before him. The bolt intertwined with it, snared before it could reach him.

As Tinasha drew up a new spell, Valt smiled. “We’ll meet again soon, *Witch of the Azure Moon*.”

What he said left Tinasha unguarded for one crucial moment, which Valt seized. He activated his teleportation spell and disappeared.

Tinasha was left to stare around in a trance. “Witch…of the Azure Moon?”

Then she shook her head violently to snap herself out of it. Striding down the hallway, she arrived at the treasure vault. The lock was broken. By searching the messily arranged space, she found that there was no white box on the pedestal. It was empty, and below the stand on the floor lay Akashia.

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“You’re lucky it was a hex I remembered dealing with. You almost landed yourself in a coma like Legis,” Tinasha remarked, colder than Oscar had ever heard her. Her tone was so chilly he could practically hear the ice floes cracking in it.

He clutched at his head, sitting up in bed. Glancing down at the marks littering his body, he knew he needed to think about what to say first. The wrong thing might mean losing his head.

But before he could open his mouth to speak, Tinasha asked, “Did that woman bring you this wine? It’s dosed with a potion.”

“No, I didn’t drink it. She cut me with a razor of some kind.”

“You really will let a woman be the death of you one of these days.”

“……”

Oscar wanted to defend himself, but he knew that this wasn’t the time. He obediently bit his tongue and kept quiet.

Tinasha was sitting on the edge of the bed with Akashia across her lap. If not for that, the mood in the room would be even more miserable.

Tinasha gave him a bright smile, though only for show. “Lazar was found asleep in an empty chamber. He was only knocked out with magic, and Doan is examining him. There *is* a team in pursuit of Lady Zefiria, but she hasn’t returned to her home. Since the hex used on you resembles the one that was placed on Legis, we can assume Valt is responsible on both counts. He’s managed to steal Eleterria right out from under us. Sorry.”

Despite the apology, it was clear Tinasha felt only rage.

Oscar cut in with one of the eleven ways of appeasing her he had thought of. “Hey, Tinasha.”

“What?” she responded, her ear-to-ear smile frightening.

But he couldn’t falter now. “First of all, thank you for saving me. And I’m sorry. I let my guard down.”

Those few words were all he had to say. Tinasha narrowed her eyes at him. While her lips were curved into an approximation of a smile, she looked more like a statue than a person.

Tinasha set Akashia aside and got onto the bed, crawling slowly over to Oscar on hands and knees, resembling nothing so much as a lithe jungle cat. She assessed him with the eyes of a predator. Then she leaned down and pressed a light kiss to his neck.

In a titillating voice, she whispered, “Is there anything else you want to say?”

“I’m sorry,” he grumbled reluctantly, sulking, and Tinasha burst out laughing.

A childlike gleam came into her dark eyes. “It’s a bit fun having our positions reversed for once.”

“Oh yeah? Well, it makes it a little better to know you’re enjoying yourself.”

“I may be feeling pleased, but I am fifty times more absolutely livid with you.”

“Don’t call off our engagement.”

“I wouldn’t!” Tinasha shouted crossly. When she touched Oscar’s shoulder, the marks on his body that were placed there to infuriate her all disappeared at once.

Looking deeply unamused, Tinasha sat back onto Oscar’s lap. “I’m glad nothing worse happened to you. I didn’t want to have to kill someone for personal reasons.”

“So you were thinking of killing me?” Oscar muttered, something cold running through him.

Tinasha threw him an appalled look. “Of course I wasn’t. I was talking about *her*. I placed a tracker on her, which I undid once I learned you had simply been careless. If I’d known she was working with Valt, I would have kept it on her. That’s my mistake. I should have knocked her out when I met her in the gardens,” Tinasha said lightly, as if she wasn’t discussing life and death. Her confidence in her magic remained apparent, however. This was her true self, the Tinasha who wasn’t a child or a queen.

Oscar couldn’t help but grin at her.

The sight prompted Tinasha to frown. “Do you understand what you did?”

“I do. I understand.”

“Did it sink in?”

“Absolutely.”

“You are prone to making women obsessed with you, so you need to be careful,” she chided seriously.

Oscar gave a wan tired smile. “What about you?”

“Unfortunately, the only men who are interested in me are after what’s inside my body.”

“What the…?”

A grin flashed across Tinasha’s face before she turned serious again. “Valt wants both orbs of Eleterria, so he shouldn’t be able to use just the one right away. I need to fortify the security around the remaining orb…”

“Why don’t you just destroy it? That seems like the path of least harm,” Oscar suggested.

“We don’t know what might happen if I try,” Tinasha said, nose scrunching up.

She had no idea how a magical artifact that could send people back in time might react to harm. The potential backlash was far too risky.

Just to be certain, Oscar asked, “Is the Tuldarr treasure vault secure?”

“I’d like to say it is, but the recent irregularities have me worried,” Tinasha admitted. After a beat, she looked at him. “Valt is extremely good at reading people. He seems to know a lot about you and me, and not just general facts.”

“Owing to when he infiltrated Farsas Castle as Nephelli’s mage, I’m sure. You talked to him then, too, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but his understanding runs deeper than the superficial. I mean in a more familiar sense.”

“Familiar?”

“He probably knows my current self. I can’t let this continue…”

Tinasha cut herself off, her gaze turning distant as her thoughts sank to a deep, dark place. All the emotion faded from her eyes, leaving behind only a cold and calculating mind.

Her train of thought took her deeper and further away. She grew so distant that it was like she was rewinding time.

She was becoming someone Oscar didn’t recognize.

“Tinasha?”

Her name fell from his lips involuntarily, surprising even Oscar himself. Immediately, the emotion came back into her gaze, and she smiled. “What is it? Are you going to beg to keep your life?”

“So you really do plan to kill me…?”

“Of course not. We’re not even married yet.”

“I know… If you’re gonna kill me, at least wait until our kids are grown.”

“I’ll consider it,” Tinasha joked, giggling. She turned to burrow into Oscar’s chest. Yet as her long eyelashes fluttered closed, her thoughts sank once more to the coldest depths.

4. At the End of a Memory

Tinasha was not a child for very long. Her position and the tumultuousness of the era did not permit it.

She couldn't rely on anyone or trust them. All around the young queen enthroned under extraordinary circumstances were people who either feared her or wanted her removed.

Her only supporters were the twelve mystical spirits she had inherited. They were the only ones she could trust, and they became like friends and family to her.

"I'm exhausted." The girl sighed, lying facedown on her huge bed.

Only a few months had passed since her coronation, and fourteen-year-old Tinasha buried her face in her pillow and sucked in a deep breath. The spirit Senn, there as her bodyguard, said to her, "You should sleep. You can't keep going like this."

"I'm fine. I won't stay up much longer. Kill any assassins that come while I'm sleeping, okay?"

"No matter who it is?"

"No matter who," she replied flatly. When Senn didn't answer, tears welled in her dark eyes. She mumbled into her pillow, "I mean…if I'm ever indulgent with anyone… Well, that's exactly the type of person that they'll try to use to kill me. I have to treat them all the same. That way, only those willing to fight me will come."

She was undoubtedly thinking of how, just the other day, a lady-in-waiting around the queen's age had attempted regicide. If she showed any weakness, her political opponents would take advantage of it. Blood did not determine who inherited the throne of Tuldarr. Eliminating Tinasha meant someone else could take her place.

Senn opened his mouth, but mostly repeated what he'd said earlier. "You should sleep. You'll sit on the throne until you're an old woman. That's probably going to feel like a long time to you."

"Not that long, I bet," she muttered. She would probably die before that. No matter how idealistic or powerful anyone was, they would not last long in times like these. People were always tricking and stabbing one another in

the back. All wished for it to end, but none could find a way out. That was true for the entire mainland.

Thus, even if Tinasha triumphed and survived, she wanted to relinquish her status before turning gray. Decades of using her extraordinary power to intimidate everyone into submission might very well drive her insane. Even if she retained her wits, her subjects would suffer if her ways of thinking grew old-fashioned and she began to pursue peace and quiet for herself. So, at most, she had another twenty years of this left.

Ruminating on how that was a very long time indeed, Tinasha glanced up. “If you want me to fall asleep, talk to me.”

“Talk to you? Shall I report on something?”

“No, just talk. Tell me about you. What was it like when you manifested before? When you made the contract with the first king?”

Her request came out of nowhere, and Senn looked bewildered. However, when he saw the hopeful curiosity in Tinasha’s eyes, he gave a rueful smile. The spirit leaned against the wall to indulge his master’s very age-appropriate curiosity. “When I manifested back then, I had quite a bit of freedom.”

“You have freedom now, too, Senn.”

“Maybe,” the man with bluish-white hair said with a dry laugh. His voice was tinged with the slightest hint of yearning. “Just as you can never forget the man who saved you…I met a very strange woman once, too, a long time ago.”

The girl rested her elbows on the bed, staring at Senn. It was rare for him to talk about himself. Out of all the twelve spirits, he was the most unemotional.

“She was free-spirited, capricious, and affectionate. She would wander off only to come back, repeating the process each time I appeared in this realm.”

“Was she…a demon?”

It would be impossible for someone with the life span of an ordinary human to come and see him each time he, a royal spirit, manifested upon the coronation of a new ruler.

Senn only smiled and did not answer. Pushing himself off the wall, he came over to the bed and placed a blanket over his master’s lithe frame. Tinasha noticed for the first time that he wore a ring.

Senn’s ruby eyes went half-lidded in a very human gesture of sympathy. “If you ever grow tired of it all, you should visit her. She’s a troublemaker, but…I know she’d make a good friend for you.”

He stroked Tinasha’s hair and, for the third time, said, “Sleep.”

The girl nodded and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath, her heart feeling somewhat lighter.

They were the only family she would trust. But they also belonged to… the ruler.

A ruler was a symbol of strength and the greatest cog in the machine that kept the citizens alive and the country running.

Regents did not need emotions or individuality.

Relying on another was a weakness. Trust meant a gap in her defenses. That was why she didn't mind being alone, as long as she had enough strength to do so.

For the next five years of Tinasha's rule she maintained that ideology—treading on thin ice all the while.

She never wavered, and displayed no weakness.

As ruler, she would use her devastating power to secure victory with all the pride of a queen.

That was, after all, the last promise she made to *him*.

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A flicker of emotion showed in Tinasha's dark eyes as she gazed down at the miniature garden. Next to her, Legis noticed it and glanced at her. Without making the slightest movement, Tinasha said to the two spirits on her other side, "I've gotten sloppy lately."

"Yes, especially since your engagement, but you've been like this ever since you arrived in this time period, you know. I thought you were just exhausted," Mila remarked.

"Thank you for that tart answer. It's quite refreshing," said Tinasha, though a smile didn't bloom on her face like it normally did. Feeling as though something were slightly off, Legis stared at her.

Karr, the other spirit, piped up. "But you never used to be super vigilant when you were younger anyway, little girl. You were so obedient and sweet that I was actually a little worried."

"What? You were? That's the first I've heard of it," the queen replied.

"Well, it's the first time I'm telling you. And I don't think it's a bad thing, either. You're only human. After becoming queen, you did everything so perfectly and carefully that it had me a bit concerned."

"A queen can't very well act like she's still a child," Tinasha remarked, nodding as if the conversation wasn't about her. "In any case, dealing with this person I'm up against feels like he's able to read my thoughts. As if that isn't impolite enough, he even seems to know my private personal details. I don't want him poking his nose in there."

Valt was clearly one step ahead of Tinasha. Since their first meeting, she had gotten the strangest sense that he could read her like a book. How was he able to look past the facade of Queen Tinasha of Tuldarr? Valt understood Tinasha's love for Oscar and what she would do to be useful to the king, using that information to trap her.

It was how he'd kidnapped her—he'd seized a chance after the battle with Simila. Likewise, he'd taken advantage of that same understanding of

Tinasha to steal the Eleterria orb. Zefiria's feelings for Oscar kept him from harm, but things could have easily escalated and resulted in his death.

Tinasha would not let Valt get away with it anymore.

Before she was a private citizen, she was a queen.

She could discard her emotions any way she pleased. She could forget them.

Only those capable of that could sit on the throne.

A ruler required a mind. Not a heart.

"I'm going to switch to another mentality."

Now she wore another face, one she had never shown in this era. Surely Valt wouldn't recognize it.

She turned a cold gaze upon the miniature garden. The light faded from her eyes. This all-powerful mage made soft a declaration of war.

"I hereby accept his challenge and will show him a side of me he does not know."

There came a change like drawing the curtains on a window. Something had altered, something small yet fundamentally different.

The air in the room shifted.

With heads lowered, the two spirits flanking Tinasha spoke together. "We are yours to command, my queen."

Tinasha gave a haughty nod. Threatening waves emanated from her, making all in the room frightened to so much as breathe. Legis had gone rigid all over. Tinasha pointed to a series of settlements in Tuldarr. "These three villages first, and these two places. Make arrangements."

"Yes…Your Majesty," he replied.

"Also, bring me all the materials you have pertaining to Magdalsia. I'll read them by tonight."

"I shall," Legis said with a bow. He paid careful attention to her many orders, never lifting his head. The intimidating air Tinasha emanated made him hesitant to do so. He merely listened as she gave instructions in a dispassionate tone of voice.

Tinasha had behaved coolly before, but she always retained a sense of amiable self-deprecation.

Not this time. None of that was present now. This was likely her true persona.

History spoke of her as a fierce queen who did not hesitate to execute anyone, and who never feared dirtying her own hands. A shiver ran through Legis as he beheld the truth of it.

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Lying on her bed, she closed her eyes. Alone in the dark, Tinasha began to sort through all the knowledge she had accumulated. She also considered the wards and surveillance spells she had set up all over, drawing new information from them.

Before entering her magic sleep four hundred years ago, she would end each day reviewing her plan and what she needed to do. She also wrote down part of that in a diary. What to prioritize, what to discard. What verdict to give, what to rescue.

Those on the throne faced these choices constantly. There could be no personal feelings involved, nor sense of self.

Tinasha expanded her consciousness. Her mind emptied. She tidied up and categorized all the disparate fragments. While multiple thoughts ran concurrently, she took a step back and observed the mental jumble with the benefit of perspective.

I still don't know where Senn is.

Her heart ached to acknowledge it. Each of her twelve spirits was irreplaceable.

She had confidants and supporters during the Dark Age, but none who could be counted as close friends. And for every supporter, there had been an opponent.

In this era with Oscar, Tinasha knew neither allies nor enemies. Perhaps it was only natural that she'd grown a bit soft. It didn't offend her to be told that; it was true.

Perhaps the time since waking in the modern day had merely been an extended vacation—a nice bit of fun for one who had been running her whole life.

And now it was coming to an end. Tinasha would set aside her own personal happiness and stride forward.

No one needed a rusted, inoperative cog.

"Ah!"

All of a sudden, Tinasha sensed someone nearby and instinctively cast a spell, leaping to her feet on the bed. Before she could launch the magic from her right hand, she caught a glimpse of a very surprised-looking man just ahead.

"Hey, you scared me," he said.

"Oscar! I was lost in thought and didn't realize it was you. Sorry," Tinasha replied, dismissing her spell.

Oscar was mid-lunge to evade the attack; it would have been a good fight. He sat on the edge of the bed and threw Tinasha a baffled glance once he got a closer look at her. "Your forehead's all scrunched up. What were you thinking so hard about?"

"All sorts of things," she answered with a tight smile. Standing, she went to grab a bottle of liqueur, and a book on the table caught her eye. "Oscar, do you know the story of the Mirror of Oblivion?"

"The Mirror of Oblivion? Sure. The fairy tale, right? The one in the book I got for the castle library."

Once upon a time, there lived a princess in a small country. She grew up happy and beloved by all, but one day the king and queen were attacked by bandits while outside the castle and perished. The princess fell into despair

and refused to leave her room for a year, no matter how her royal attendants cajoled her.

But then a traveling mage heard of her plight and sent her an old looking glass, a mirror said to absorb all sadness. When she peered into it, she stopped crying and left her room to be among her people again.

Such was the ancient fable recounted since the dawn of the Dark Age.

"The story of the Mirror of Oblivion is told all over our land," said Tinasha, "but it changes a little in each region. In some versions, it isn't sadness the mirror takes, but memories. Others have it that the mirror steals the minds of those who refuse to believe in its power, and sends them into comas."

"Huh. That's interesting."

"About a hundred years ago, a researcher in Tuldarr looked into it and published a paper. According to the report, every nation has the odd account of someone who encountered the mirror. Following that trail leads us to the last place it was sighted…Magdalsia." Tinasha handed Oscar a glass.

He looked faintly shocked. "Do you think the fairy tale has some connection to the witch in Magdalsia?"

"It's one possibility of many. However, if the Witch of the Forbidden Forest wanted to steal a country, why would she appear after the king fell into a coma? It would be easier for someone with her power to use psychological manipulation, rather than incapacitate a ruler. The incapacitated king is why Tuldarr learned of the situation, after all."

"So you believe the witch appeared *because* the king fell unconscious?"

"That's what I suspect. I'm going through any fishy-sounding stories with a fine-tooth comb to try and discover what brought on the king's mystery coma and why it summoned a witch. The Mirror of Oblivion is one compelling candidate," Tinasha explained, climbing onto the bed, sprawling out on her back, and throwing an arm over her eyes.

It looked like she wanted the conversation to end there. Sensing something different about her in that moment, Oscar set down his glass. "Tinasha?"

Five days had passed since one orb of Eleterria was stolen from Farsas. Ever since, Oscar had noticed a slight change in Tinasha's behavior. It was as though her mind were constantly working while her emotions had been set aside. There was a noticeable sharpness to her as well, like all her edges were honed.

Called back to herself, Tinasha asked, "Hmm? What is it?"

"Nothing. Are you upset?"

"I'm not upset," she chirped, smiling at Oscar. But her arm remained thrown across her eyes. She wouldn't look at him—as if she had no need to. It was certainly different from anger. Oscar could sense how terribly far away her heart was, and he found himself at a loss for words.

This was the woman he was supposed to marry in three weeks, yet it was the first time he'd seen this side of her.

They still met every day as usual, but recently, Oscar had noticed that something felt slightly off, accompanied by a mysterious sense of déjà vu. Thus, he made sure to ask Tinasha about it to check on her, and sure enough, something really had changed.

What was to blame for this shift? Oscar reached out and touched Tinasha's face. "What's going on?"

"What do you mean? Nothing's going on," she replied, dropping her arm and revealing her dark, cold eyes. Tinasha sat up and looped her arms around her knees. "I think I'm going to visit Magdalsia to investigate after all."

"You're *what*?"

"I'll go undercover, gather what info I can, and then take out the witch, if necessary," she stated. Her matter-of-fact demeanor stunned Oscar.

He recovered swiftly, however. "Absolutely not. Do you realize that your abdication and our wedding are just around the corner? Why go stirring up trouble?"

"I am the only person who can battle the Witch of the Forbidden Forest," Tinasha answered. To Oscar, that felt more scathing than the words alone should have been. He remembered Lavinia's letter, which rendered him incapable of replying, before Tinasha could continue. "If I let her do as she pleases, things might grow out of control. I will take her down now, before that can happen."

"But…she still has royal authority in Magdalsia. Considering your position, one wrong move could start a war," Oscar pointed out.

"So I should just wait for her to attack? If we delay, we'll only end up suffering greater damage, and there's no telling how she'll outsmart us."

"But that's—"

In a sense, Tinasha was correct. Responding now was the right move to secure peace in Tuldarr. However, it was also a clear act of war. Such a preemptive strike from a powerful mage had not been seen in hundreds of years. Should the truth of it come to light, the ramifications would shake the mainland to its core. It was akin to…

"You're going against the times," Oscar observed. A while back, Druza had attacked Farsas with a forbidden curse, and Tinasha had aided in repelling it. In the aftermath, the major powers signed a treaty banning the use of forbidden curses in war. Should Tinasha go rogue here, that treaty might turn into mere lip service.

In reply, Tinasha gave a beautiful smile and a confident answer. "That will get sorted out one way or another."

Implicit in what she said was enough power to make anyone who heard her tremble.

This woman sat on the throne four centuries ago; that was who she was. At her center, she was a Dark Age queen.

Oscar hadn’t forgotten it, but ultimately, he hadn’t known what that truly meant. During that period, everyone had to fight and backstab one another—life itself was not guaranteed. To protect her country, Tinasha had vanquished a witch. And now, she was attempting to do it again.

Yet while she’d survived then, she could easily lose this fight.

Oscar grabbed her arm. “Don’t go.”

“You don’t have the authority to stop me,” she replied, echoing something Oscar had said to her once. But it felt different coming from her.

For a moment, Oscar wavered between warning her as one ruler to another or stopping the woman as her fiancé. No matter which he chose, the answer was the same. “I am going to be your husband.”

“You are. And I will become Farsas’s queen consort. I have that position to keep in mind,” Tinasha said, giving the answer of a sovereign queen. Her black eyes glanced down at Oscar’s grip on her arm. “But we aren’t married yet, and you are a member of a foreign nation.”

“Tinasha…”

Having her point it out made all the blood rush to his head, but it was unquestionably true. Oscar knew very well that they ruled different countries, although they had come far by supporting each other. So then why was she rejecting him now?

“Do you not want to live in this era?” he muttered. Hadn’t Tinasha traveled forward four hundred years in time to be with him?

Her black eyes widened a fraction. There was a tranquil glow to them. “This time period is the reason we’re not enemies.”

Was that a form of hope in her eyes?

Oscar recalled how Tinasha had abdicated during the Dark Age. After defeating a witch and triumphing over Tayiri, rumors began circulating in Tuldarr that someone who could kill a witch might be a witch herself. Amid that tumult, Tinasha was forced to relinquish her position.

And she was even stronger now than she was then.

Oscar stared at her, this person he once thought he knew extremely well. Perhaps the best solution would be for her to lose her chastity and a fraction of her power with it. Tinasha carried too much individual might and too strong a desire to head into battle. It was dangerous to leave her unattended. One misstep could spell catastrophe for the mainland.

However, that was not an option the man who loved Tinasha could suggest.

As Oscar fell silent, still clinging to her arm, Tinasha gave him an innocent smile. “What’s wrong? If you’re thinking of reducing my magic, go ahead. I’ll win, even if I lose some of my ability to use spiritual magic. Or are you thinking of restraining me in a more direct manner?”

Beneath that grin lay a hostility that made it plain she wouldn’t balk at making an enemy of him.

She was so far away, distant enough to be unreachable.

How could she have changed this much?

Oscar was stunned, and he released Tinasha's arm without realizing it. "I don't…know what you're thinking."

"The same as ever. This is who I've always been," she stated as she reached up and looped her arms around Oscar's neck, snuggling in and holding him tight.

Her warmth was no different, but her mind couldn't have been further away.

Closing his eyes against a significant rush of sentimentality, Oscar realized where that odd sense of familiarity had come from.

This was the same person he caught a glimpse of in Tinasha's diaries from four hundred years ago.

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Piled haphazardly on the floor of the study were stacks of papers penned by the past sixty-seven generations of so-called heirs to the family. All of them had written so much—no, some refused and fled. One such example was his own father, who hanged himself.

"Valt, did you scribe any of these?" Miralys asked.

"Plenty. Whenever I had something I wanted recorded for the next time."

Miralys frowned, holding a broom in her hand. As her eyes turned anxious, Valt immediately gave her a reassuring smile. "There's no need for you to make that face. The people who wrote these did so because they wanted to. What they recorded would disappear with a rewinding of time. But while all of them could remember every life they experienced, they didn't know anything beyond that. If they wanted to inform future heirs about what had happened up until that point and what changed when time restarted, writing it down was the only way."

Some of the past successors had memories from multiple lifetimes, while others didn't. There had been many types of heirs before Valt. Only a small portion of their number were recorded here.

"Of course, not everyone documented things each time. Some were too worn down by multiple rewritings of history to leave records. To fill in those blanks, others penned what they recalled of records they had read in earlier lives. It really varied," Valt explained. The sizable archives seemed a representation of a great many people and all the lifetimes they'd experienced.

However, the only thing that mattered was what each one had inside. Valt glanced at the girl next to him. The first time he met her was at the end of a distant memory, one so remote it was aggravating.

In a part of some forest only a few steps from a main road, he saved an injured girl. The Miralys of the present didn't remember it, but Valt would never truly forget. It was a terribly precious…and very regrettable memory.

Miralys walked over to the stack of papers. "There's some material on the Witch of the Azure Moon in here, isn't there?"

“Yes, although she rarely came down from her tower. I know more of her than the records do. Because I knew her when she was his queen—”

Just then, the ceiling of the study shook violently. Miralys screamed, “What’s going on?!”

“Oh no, did she abandon Magdalsia to come here?” Valt moaned.

From the way the mansion was creaking and groaning, it was obvious who had arrived.

“Miralys, over here!” Valt shouted, dashing to a corner of the study and lifting the trapdoor concealed on the floor there. It led to a passage underground, and he stuffed Miralys into it. Despite her shock, she obeyed without a word. Valt had one foot down in the passage when he wove a fire spell and launched it at the archives.

“Valt?!”

“It’s fine. We can’t leave them there.”

Tearing his gaze away from the burning sheaves, Valt hurried down the stairs. As he dashed along the underground passageway that led off the property, he muttered, “Why is she doing this when she should be incredibly busy? In a sense, she’s more trouble than when she was his queen.”

Across countless lifetimes, Tinasha had been a witch and queen consort at once. Valt knew. Having lived for eons, she held herself apart from the world. She was a fiercely compassionate, kindhearted loner who liked people but kept her distance.

The current Tinasha was similar to all of that, yet atypical. The king of Farsas drew out her girlish side remarkably, though in the past several days, she’d been acting more merciless than when she was a witch. Perhaps because her mind was still young, she was highly aggressive and decisive. That was how she had conducted herself as a sovereign during the Dark Age—a side of her Valt was ignorant of.

“This was in the records from four hundred years ago, but I certainly never expected the change to be this drastic,” Valt said quietly. Cold sweat formed on his nape as he hurried down the passageway that stretched into the dark.

That was when he heard the roar of a cave-in behind him.

Focusing on what needs to be done could avert sadness.

Tinasha had learned that form of mental control when she was queen many years ago.

Therefore, she was not sad. She’d never had anything to be sad about.

“If they thought I’d focus all my attention on Magdalsia and take no action, they’re sorely mistaken,” the queen stated coldly, her face an emotionless mask.

Next to her, Mila asked, “Are you sure about this, Lady Tinasha?”

“Sure about what?”

“You’re fighting with the Akashia swordsman,” the spirit remarked while floating next to Tinasha in the sky.

For a moment, Tinasha gaped at Mila. Then she burst out laughing. “We’re not fighting. We just had a disagreement.”

“But you’re about to get married. What if he’s tired of you now?”

“Hmm. Well, I can’t do anything about that if it happens,” Tinasha replied indifferently.

Mila’s eyes grew wide. “You’re really okay with it?”

“I can’t change how he feels, and I have something I need to do. Even if I don’t become his queen, I can still be by his side in other ways. Farsas would approve of something like that more readily anyhow.”

“Something like what?”

Tinasha only grimaced. Then an intricate spell configuration formed between her hands. From the air, the queen peered down at the mansion below. Located on the outskirts of a rural town in Tayiri, the holiday villa had belonged to some noble or other for five years. That was the cover story, anyway. However, several days of monitoring a magical surveillance network that spanned the mainland had revealed the truth.

Tinasha snapped her fingers. “I finally got a bite on one of my lines, but it took up a good chunk of time. Still, now I have some hope of winning.” She signaled Mila with a look, and the spirit nodded. “Let’s go. After this, I have to appear at the Gandona ball.”

The queen snapped again. With that cue, her spell became a gigantic cage and sank onto the mansion below. It would prevent teleportation and crush anything within.

Unfortunately, it was repelled, if only just, by defensive wards laid upon the estate. Mila whistled. “Wow! That’s a pretty ironclad barrier.”

“Looks like we’ll have to force our way in,” Tinasha said dismissively, lifting her right hand. Then she swung it straight down. A huge hammer made of magic smashed a hole in the villa’s roof with a loud *bang*. With the core of the wards destroyed, the barrier dispersed.

Tinasha and Mila descended into the hole. Immediately, Mila frowned. “It’s all smoky. Did something catch on fire?”

“Or someone set one, perhaps as a smoke screen,” Tinasha replied, erecting a defensive barrier around herself and the spirit as she landed inside the mansion. They appeared to be in the living room, although it was difficult to be certain, given all the floating white ash.

As she redirected the airflow in the room, Tinasha glanced around. Smoke was pouring from a spot just beyond a toppled wooden chair. Mila went in first, followed by Tinasha. There she found the source of the blaze.

“Documents?”

Stacks of papers were alight. There were enough sheets for close to one hundred bound volumes. Tinasha picked up a sheaf that was farthest from the conflagration, which had so far been spared the flames. She strained to make out what it said.

“What in the—?”

“I’m sorry, Lady Tinasha. They got away,” Mila reported, popping her head out from a hole in one corner of the room. The underground passage must have taken them outside the ban on teleportation. Tinasha’s attack was meant to catch them off guard, but they’d still proved to be quicker.

However, Tinasha was more concerned with the papers in her hands. As she read, her face screwed up in a dark scowl.

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Once a year, the Great Nation of Gandona held a ceremony to commemorate its founding, an event the most influential and powerful individuals of every country attended.

Naturally, Oscar was in attendance at the castle in Gandona. He suppressed a sigh as he donned formal attire in his guest room. He never liked going to state functions, but that was the least of his worries.

His first concern was that Aurelia’s guardian, a revolting demon man, would also be there. The other was that he would see his fiancée.

While Tinasha refused to let him stop her, she ultimately didn’t go to Magdalsia. When he asked if she was holding herself back, she smiled but said nothing. Oscar was puzzled by the distance that had somehow opened up between them, even though they saw each other daily.

He’d even inquired whether she’d had a change of heart about their relationship. With a strained grin, she’d denied it, claiming she didn’t suddenly hate him. However, she did request a hold on wedding planning for the moment, because the near future was too uncertain. From Oscar’s perspective, it was clear that things had shifted around in her list of priorities.

“Why is she so impossible to get a read on?” he muttered, staring at himself in the mirror as he fastened his jacket cuffs. His foul mood was written all over his face, but aside from that, he looked fine. Upon leaving his guest chamber and joining Als, who had been waiting outside, they entered the hall.

First, Oscar greeted the king of Gandona, the man of the hour. After that, he looked around but did not see Tinasha. However, he caught sight of Aurelia and her chaperone on the other side of the hall. The man noticed Oscar’s gaze and gave him a nasty smirk, one entirely unlike the pleasant smiles he’d shown all the young ladies in attendance.

Oscar’s eye twitched. Under his breath, he muttered, “I hate that guy.”

Als evidently caught the remark, for he winced. “It does not appear that Queen Tinasha has arrived.”

“Yeah, she’s been running around like crazy lately,” Oscar replied curtly.

That was when the woman in question made her appearance.

Although her hair was only in a loose updo, and she was dressed in a black gown sporting little ornamentation, she was still beautiful enough to turn heads. Oscar watched from a distance as she greeted the king of

Gandona with a diplomatic smile. Behind her trailed a red-haired girl clad in formal attire, marking perhaps the first time a mystical spirit had accompanied Tinasha to an official function. Oscar was surprised.

After Tinasha completed her formal greetings, she let her gaze wander the hall. After marking out where Oscar and Travis were, she wove her way through the crowd and approached the former. He glanced down, partially dismayed. “You’re dressed so plainly. And you’re late, too.”

“I made it just on time. I haven’t eaten anything yet… It hasn’t been my lucky day,” she replied, sighing dispiritedly.

Now she looked like the Tinasha he knew. Oscar laughed and grabbed a plate from a nearby table. “Here, get some sugar.”

“You want me to start with sweets?!” Tinasha cried, but she received the tray obediently enough and partook of the cream-covered pastries. As she devoured them with impeccable manners, she took a step closer to Oscar and whispered, “I found out something kind of dicey. I want to ask Travis about it.”

After a sullen pause, Oscar bit out, “Fine.”

While he certainly wanted to object, he knew that would do no good. It risked worsening his relationship with Tinasha, throwing the situation into chaos. Of course, that might happen after she spoke with Travis anyway, but they could worry about that when it happened.

Once Oscar nodded, Mila brought Travis and Aurelia over. Travis bowed and gave a courteous greeting, which morphed into his usual rough manner of speaking immediately after Tinasha put up a barrier to prevent anyone from hearing their conversation.

“What did you call us over for? What do you need?” he questioned brusquely.

Tinasha finished her second pastry and set her plate down. “I’ll get right to it. Do you have any memories of time repeating?”

Oscar frowned. He knew what she was trying to ask. Tinasha wanted to know if this demon king recalled the world before Eleterria rewrote it.

Aurelia looked confused. Patting her head, Travis scoffed. “Oh, so that’s what this is about. I don’t have any memories, because those orbs are outsiders’ artifacts.”

Tinasha cocked an eyebrow. “Outsiders’ artifacts? What does that mean?”

“What? You mean *you* don’t know?” Travis said. He glanced at Oscar, who shook his head. Reluctantly, Travis went on. “To put it simply, it’s a general term for items with powers that shouldn’t be possible under the laws of magic. That means they affect me as much as anyone else. There are no exceptions.”

“Really? Sometimes you truly make me wonder. Occasionally, you act like you know the future or you’re aware of what it was before things changed.”

“I don’t know anything. Get off my back,” Travis huffed, waving Tinasha off crossly.

That made Oscar recall something. “Wait. The first time we met, you called me her husband.”

At the time, Oscar and Tinasha hadn’t been engaged—they hadn’t even been romantically involved. Surely that meant Travis knew their prior history, the one where they were married.

The demon king could not mask his annoyance at Oscar’s comment. “You didn’t need to remember that…”

“It was kind of hard to forget.”

“Shall I erase that memory for you?”

Before the two men could engage in pointless bickering, Tinasha intervened. “Travis, answer me honestly. I saw records of a history that doesn’t exist.”

Tinasha’s face had gone pale, and Travis replied irritably, “You saw that? Which part?”

“The part about Cezar. Before history changed, there was no Simila in Cezar. It was a prosperous Great Nation that never attacked Farsas.”

No one said a word.

After thinking it over for a few seconds, Travis patted Aurelia on the shoulder. “You go over there for a while.”

“Oh, but—”

“Go on. And don’t follow any strangers,” he insisted in a tone brooking no refusal. The girl nodded and left the hall, looking over her shoulder repeatedly as she walked away.

Once Aurelia was gone, Travis turned back to Oscar and Tinasha. “First off, I really don’t recall anything. High-ranking demons are not exactly compatible with outsiders’ artifacts, because they operate on all planes of existence. That said, I’ve seen the same records you did—many times. There’s this family of Time-Readers, and they *do* retain their memories. They have mass archives of various repeated histories that they pass down through generations. The current heir is… You know him, don’t you? A guy named Valt.”

Oscar and Tinasha both inhaled sharply.

The plot against them, the meticulousness of it. Everything traced back to the frightening records and memories their enemy had access to. It was difficult to believe right away, but it was also a truth they had both somehow suspected. They were left stunned.

“Did you only see the records about Cezar?” Travis drawled, sounding bored.

“Yes. All the others were destroyed in a fire,” Tinasha answered.

“Well, I’d call that lucky. It’s best for humans not to see too much of that stuff,” the demon king said.

In a sense, he was probably right. The records spoke of something Tinasha had no memory of—a self that was not herself. Accounts of a

vanished world could only be for sentimental purposes. It didn't seem to Oscar that any good could come from reading them.

Oscar glanced at Tinasha. "Were the papers that escaped the fire Valt's?"

"Yes. I've been tracking his magic for a while and traced him to a mansion in a corner of Tayiri. I attacked it just before coming here. The coward got away by escaping through an underground passage."

"Bet that shaved a dozen years off his life span."

While Oscar did believe Tinasha hadn't gone to Magdalsia, he hadn't expected her to go after Valt instead. The man *did* have one half of Eleterria, though, which put him at the top of Tinasha's priority list.

"Tell me more about these outsiders' artifacts. What does 'powers that shouldn't be possible under the laws of magic' mean?" Tinasha pressed.

"Why do I have to tell you? Figure it out on your own," Travis grumbled.

"Valt wants Eleterria!" she cried, and Travis scowled for the first time during their conversation.

He stared searchingly at Oscar, then at Tinasha. With an annoyed click of his tongue, he responded, "Outsiders' artifacts enable what is impossible according to the laws of magic. That doesn't mean they operate using undiscovered principles—they *defy* them. And there's a few of them around. Most of them are objects with legendary characteristics, like Eleterria."

"They defy the laws of magic, huh?" Oscar repeated quietly. Tinasha had told him multiple times that it was beyond magic to rewind time. He also knew of something else she had spoken of in the same way. "Does that mean those old ruins full of cocoons were an outsiders' artifact, too?"

"Huh? Oh, that place that abducts humans and makes copies of them. That's an interesting one. A long time ago, I saw it swallow up entire villages all at once," Travis commented.

"If you saw it happen, you should have done something about it!" Tinasha exclaimed, naturally.

"As if I'd care," Travis sniffed, naturally.

She let out a long, resigned sigh. "Why are they called outsiders' artifacts, anyway? This is the first time I've heard that name."

"Well, because the existence of such things is a problem in and of itself. Any humans who know about them would have a hard time going public with that knowledge. They were all brought in from beyond our world," Travis said blandly.

His explanation didn't surprise Oscar, because he'd suspected the same thing himself and had asked Tinasha about it once. Undoubtedly, she remembered that conversation, too, because she only seemed a little rattled as she asked, "So there really is something outside of our world?"

"Why did you think there wouldn't be? You mortals can barely even recognize that there are different planes of existence, but you acknowledge that they're real because we demons and other negative manifestations

exist. So why didn’t an outsiders’ artifact lead you to consider the existence of something foreign to this world?”

“It seemed like a leap too far. We have far more evidence of the different realms and planes of existence,” Tinasha pointed out.

“So rigid in your thinking. Well, you’re free to believe what you like. Go ahead and think that what you know is all that exists, without even considering that there may be those who enjoy watching you from the outside.” Travis smirked, looking as if none of this had anything to do with him.

Perhaps he truly believed himself uninvolved. After all, he had also spent centuries delighted with spectating humans.

Tinasha huffed out a laugh. “So it’s like how characters in a book remain unaware that a person is observing from outside the story? But if all they want to do is watch us, then isn’t rewriting the past overly intrusive?”

“It’s you mortals who make the choice to alter history. Regardless, it’s futile to understand what the outsiders are thinking. I met one of them a long time ago—a completely incomprehensible woman.”

Tinasha hopped forward. “You’ve met one?! That’s not fair! It’s like you know the correct answer already!”

“Oh, hush. It’s you mortals’ own fault for being so out of the loop. Besides, while she was an outsider, she also wasn’t. She chose to be an ally to humans and lived and died among them. This happened long before you were born. That was just one person, and she has nothing to do with the artifacts.”

Oscar frowned. Over the course of simply listening to Travis and Tinasha talk, something had gotten stuck in his mind. Earlier, when Travis had said, “You mean *you* don’t know?” he’d looked at Oscar, not at Tinasha.

“Wait, was she—?”

Before Oscar could finish his thought, however, a man approached, having slipped briskly through the crowd. He bowed silently before Tinasha, though anxiety was clear on his face. Oscar recognized him as a magistrate of Tuldarr.

“Your Majesty, I have an urgent message,” he said, then glanced at the other two men, unsure if he should go on with them present.

“They are of no concern. Speak,” ordered the queen.

“Yes, Your Majesty. A short while ago, Magdalsia breached the national border and began an invasion. They have about thirty thousand troops and will reach southern Tuldarr in a half hour.”

“What?” Oscar blurted out in his surprise.

But Tinasha only let out a small sigh. Her dark eyes shone with a cold gleam. Rapidly, her entire aura sharpened to a point. “They’ve come a bit earlier than I anticipated. Understood. Give the order to mobilize our troops. I will be there immediately.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” answered the magistrate, who hurried off into the throng the way he’d come.

Tinasha watched him depart and then turned to Oscar. For a second, he saw loneliness in her eyes. Yet all too soon, it was painted over by the falling of a cold night.

The corners of her lips turned up as she smiled. “I will take my leave now. Thank you, Travis.”

“Sure. See you,” he replied.

The black-clad queen made to leave, and, before Oscar could stop her, she disappeared.

Oscar brought a hand to his mouth. Tuldarr was under attack by another country. While Magdalsia was no Great Nation, it had a witch at its helm who was very likely to utilize a forbidden curse in the war or introduce some manner of weapon that was even worse. Given Tinasha’s reaction, she had been aware that Magdalsia was readying itself for battle. Tuldarr’s own army was prepared to march as well. Tinasha hadn’t gone to Magdalsia personally, because she had chosen war with them over conquering the witch.

“Finally, she’s back to her old self. I didn’t know how long she was going to keep acting like some spineless wimp.” Travis sounded deeply amused. Oscar eyed this inhuman creature.

Noticing the gaze, the demon king stared back at Oscar. “What’s with that face? She’s always been like that. She just got soft after coming to this time period. Oh, here’s a fun story. I’ll tell you about the war with Tayiri.”

Travis grinned mockingly. “At the time, the Tayiri army had about…fifty thousand troops, I think. And Tuldarr had less than seven hundred.”

“What? They couldn’t have possibly stood a chance, then.”

“That’s what you’d think, right? But it’s true. Tuldarr was an isolated country, ignorant of the ways of the world. They didn’t have a proper military back then, although once *she* became queen, things changed. She started training up soldiers little by little and organized the mages for combat, too. Still, she had no end of enemies within the castle. So when Tayiri attacked, she was stuck inside.”

“She couldn’t act?”

“Yep. The Traditionalists opposed war with Tayiri and wanted her to surrender without a fight. They believed Tuldarr couldn’t win.”

“So she couldn’t get to the battlefield…”

In the Dark Age, having many enemies in the castle was a given. Tinasha had also been an extremely young queen. If she left to battle Tayiri, the Traditionalists might have seized their chance to take over the country and declare a surrender. Thus, she stayed put to prevent that, choosing not to yield for the future of mages and Tuldarr.

She was fierce by nature, but that did not mean she preferred eccentric strategies. If at all possible, she would have surely raised an army the size of Tayiri’s and engaged the enemy.

Instead, she cooked up an outlandish plan. Of the two thousand troops in Tuldarr, one thousand were sent to the border to warn Druza and Farsas,

while three hundred remained in the castle. She took the remaining seven hundred to confront Tayiri.

It was on a stormy day that Tayiri discovered Tuldarr's army numbered only a few hundred and set out to slaughter them. However, Tuldarr's military fled without a fight once they spotted the Tayiri soldiers. Following in pursuit, the Tayiri army's formation got disrupted, and they landed smack in the middle of a fog that had crept up around them while they were unaware. Such a thick mist was highly unusual for a grassland. Heedless, they wandered into the dense fog like children lost in a nightmare, unable to see the people and horses ahead of them. Amid the vapor, they began killing one another by mistake with unprecedented ferocity.

It all went as the Tuldarr army had cleverly orchestrated. As the Tayiri soldiers realized they were fighting one another, they found themselves blocked by a huge wall of flames. From the other side of the burning walls, relentless volleys of magic buffeted them. The surviving Tayiri soldiers later said, "That was a sight no one should ever have to see."

Unable to fight back, the army was routed by fire and spells. After a narrow escape, the Tayiri army discovered it had suffered thirty thousand casualties on the first day.

Most horrifying of all was that the one who had instructed Tuldarr's forces was the queen in the castle.

She observed through the eyes of the mystical spirits she dispatched for surveillance while also communicating magically with her closest advisers. That was how she gave direction to the mages in the army and, even from so far away in the palace, reversed the overwhelming disadvantage.

The next day, a witch appeared before her.

Oscar held back a sigh of grief for young Tinasha.

He trusted that she was an excellent ruler. From what little he'd seen of her diary, he knew she'd stood firm in a maelstrom of war both within the country and without.

However, he'd never imagined her orchestrating such a cutthroat strategy. The way she smiled at him so innocently made it difficult to believe.

This meant that Tinasha was now back to her true self, the queen who fought to the bitter end despite her own loneliness.

So that's her other side… It's truly a world apart.

All royals had two faces—a public one and a private one. While Oscar largely operated with his public demeanor while keeping his private feelings in check, Tinasha's two sides formed a clear duality. Both portions were opposed.

That was only becoming evident now that Tuldarr was at war, despite remaining hidden during her coronation and her fight with the demoness.

The appearance of a witch meant that Tinasha was about to become the Witch Killer Queen once more.

“I told you it was a fun story, didn’t I? Anyway, she was fighting a battle while working on eliminating her enemies in Tuldarr at the same time. She didn’t have any spirits to spare—they were all filling in as castle guards for the soldiers who’d gone off to fight. The Traditionalists who meant to capitalize on a chance to assassinate her wound up arrested instead. She left herself open on purpose, and they fell for it. One after another, they were all executed or banished.”

“All of them? But wasn’t it the Traditionalists who pressured her to step down after the war?”

“So the records claim, but it’s not actually true. There wasn’t a single Traditionalist left by then. She made the decision herself to appear like she’d been forced to abdicate to satisfy Tayiri.”

“But…”

If Tinasha had stepped down from the throne by choice, then that changed the story drastically. It made clear that she believed her extraordinary might put her at the same level as a witch. She’d expelled herself for having too much strength.

“There is no need for a ruler to possess mighty power.”

She’d said that many times since coming to this time period. From the beginning, she’d seen herself as an anachronism. Yet she had chosen the path of abomination once again.

And once the dust settled, what would she relinquish this time?

Wait a minute… Is she not planning to become my queen?

If a person dangerous enough to kill witches single-handedly became the queen consort of the Great Nation of Farsas, other countries would undoubtedly grow exceedingly worried. That meant Tinasha had already abandoned a future where she became Oscar’s queen. It explained her request for the wedding plans to be postponed.

Even if she still came to him after everything was over, it would only be as someone under the watchful eye of Akashia’s wielder. At best, Tinasha would be his mistress; at worst, a prisoner. Either way, she would never show herself in public. She was going to force him to accept that.

“She’s crazy,” Oscar muttered.

He knew that if such a future came to be, Tinasha would only smile and insist, “I’m perfectly happy this way.”

Whether that was true or not, Oscar would find it unbearable.

Oscar turned to Als, who stood behind him. “Change of plans. I’m going back to Farsas.”

If he acted now, there was still a chance that the situation could be resolved privately, without other countries finding out. Legis, the next king of Tuldarr, wouldn’t want the image of the queen who preceded him to be tainted with needless prejudice. Oscar could work with Legis and appeal to the other nations. While Tinasha confronted the witch, they would handle the diplomatic side of things and control the narrative.

Fortunately, Magdalsia was the aggressor, and it was headed by a witch, a creature fearsome to all. Oscar felt confident that if he got the major nations' understanding, he could do something from within Farsas. All that remained was coordinating with Tinasha.

As Oscar bid a hasty good-bye, Travis suddenly went from smirking to grave. "About what we discussed tonight… Do not hand over Eleterria. I don't want any do-overs of history, even if I remain unaware of them. I don't want to forget Aurelia, and there's no guarantee that things will happen the same way. Don't use it, and don't allow it to get stolen. I refuse to let this timeline go." Without waiting for a reply, the demon king walked away, melting into the crowd.

Now that this inhuman being had gone back to his girl, where should Oscar go next? What should he do? He still didn't have a clear idea, but inaction was not an option. Thus, Oscar left the ornate, gorgeously decorated hall behind, his heart heavy.

Although his aim was to get out of Gandona swiftly, Oscar had to make a detour to his guest room first. And it was there that he detected something was off.

Nothing had been amiss when he left the room, but now there was very clearly something wrong. Oscar scanned the room, gripped by a vague sensation that he wasn't alone. Drawing Akashia, he demanded, "Who is it?"

He hadn't expected an answer, but a young man replied, "I have a few things to discuss with you, so I let myself in."

No person emerged—there was only a voice. Oscar recognized it, however. "Valt? Show yourself."

"You can't be serious. I'm quite afraid of you, you know. Anyway, would you like to hear something nice? It's about the Witch of the Forbidden Forest."

Oscar's intuition told him that what he could sense of Valt was too faint for the man to be hidden in the room. While Oscar had deliberated over how to respond to the mysterious voice at first, that made him fire back, "Tell me."

"Always so quick to decide. The woman who controls Magdalsia now…is not the Witch of the Forbidden Forest," Valt revealed, and Oscar had to bite his tongue to stop from making a noise of surprise.

Tinasha had all but decided that the one stirring up trouble was a witch. If she was wrong, the consequences could be astronomical.

Valt went on calmly. "However, physically, she is the same as the Witch of the Forbidden Forest. It is only the soul inside that differs. The soul inside her now is that of King Hubert of Magdalsia."

Oscar frowned. Things were escalating beyond expectation to a scale that felt absurd. "Is that even possible?"

"Not with magic. But unfortunately, there is an artifact that enables it. I believe you call it the Mirror of Oblivion?"

"Is that an outsiders' artifact?"

“Oh, did you hear that from that demon king? That does save me the trouble of explaining. Yes, it is an outsiders’ artifact. The witch’s soul is sealed within the looking glass, along with your queen’s missing spirit.”

“Within the mirror? According to the fairy tale, it’s only supposed to absorb sadness.”

“Yes, in the most widely circulated version. But absorbing sadness is merely one side effect. What the Mirror of Oblivion actually does is capture human souls and memories, recording them. It’s triggered when you lock eyes with your reflection.”

Valt was revealing incredibly detailed information about an item from beyond the known world. Perhaps Valt knew so much about it because of his intimacy with another outsiders’ artifact, Eleterria.

“The Mirror of Oblivion has been sealed away along with the Witch of the Forbidden Forest in a cave deep in Magdalsia for a very long time. But it would appear the seal has been broken, and the mirror was taken and sold to the king as an antique. King Hubert gazed into his new looking glass, but the seal within the artifact must still be intact. His extracted soul couldn’t enter it. From there, I imagine it wandered around until it found the body of the witch and possessed it.”

Oscar picked up on a vague sense of bitterness from Valt, though it vanished in an instant, so perhaps it was only his imagination.

“If the mirror is broken, the witch’s true spirit will return, and the king’s will be driven from her body. But outsiders’ artifacts are sturdily crafted, so your queen is the only one who can manage it.”

“What a ridiculous story,” Oscar scoffed. He was having a hard time believing all of this coming from out of nowhere. According to mages, separating a person’s soul from their body was impossible. But outsiders’ artifacts enabled what was magically impossible.

In a voice kept even so as not to give away his doubt over which was the truth, Oscar replied, “If that’s true, why are you telling me this? It sounds like a trap.”

“It *is* true. I’ve offended Tinasha quite terribly in the past, so I wanted to do something to try and mend her impression of me a little.”

“That’s not going to happen. Aren’t you the one who gave the Mirror of Oblivion to the king of Magdalsia in the first place?”

“Why…would you think that?” Valt questioned stiffly.

Oscar retorted matter-of-factly, “You’re much too knowledgeable about all of this to be merely a messenger. What’s your angle? If you’re trying to lure her out, you’re on a suicide mission.”

“I’m not that reckless. She is quite formidable at present.”

Several hours earlier, Tinasha had attacked Valt’s estate. He shouldn’t want to see her at all, so then how did he stand to benefit? Why had he given the king of Magdalsia the Mirror of Oblivion only to turn around and feed Oscar information and urge him to undo everything?

Belatedly, Valt responded to Oscar's question. His voice sounded strained. "It's simple. It was a mistake to use the witch's body to declare war on Tuldarr. In truth, I only intended for the Mirror of Oblivion to put King Hubert into a coma for a diversion."

"Yeah, you've really botched this one. And now you want her to clean up your mess?"

"I don't care if Tuldarr and the witch end up clashing. But…I don't wish for *her* to remain in that state. You understand what I mean, don't you?"

"……."

Ever since the Eleterria orb had been stolen, Tinasha had been changing by the day.

She decided everything on her own and implemented her decisions immediately. That had to be difficult for Valt to contend with. Tinasha had to be somewhat aware of this herself, since she fretted that Valt could predict her thoughts.

"Left to her own devices, she'll take unpredictable actions like destroying my mansion. I'd like to ask you to take the reins, so to speak. And, admittedly, I don't wish for her to die. You can tell that I bear her no ill will, can't you?"

"You would have killed us long ago if you wanted to."

"I'm glad you understand. So consider this a mere confluence of mutual interest. All you have to do is tell her that she needs to break the mirror. No one has to fight a witch. I would hate for Tuldarr Castle and its half of Eleterria to be destroyed in a battle."

"By witch, you mean Hubert, right?"

"Yes, but magic is in the soul, while half of knowledge resides within the body, and the two are linked. A different soul can still use quite a bit of the body's magical power. At most, the spells will be clumsy and crude. Now that he has the strength of a witch, he will not hesitate to wield it even more brazenly than she would have. That's obvious from how Magdalsia mobilized for battle."

Under normal circumstances, a country as small as Magdalsia would never have attacked Tuldarr. It wouldn't stand a chance at winning. However, King Hubert must have decided that victory was assured with the witch's power.

Too much strength could easily lead a person astray, a fact that history had borne out. Generals had brandished devastating military might to carry out massacres, while kings had ordered execution after execution for no reason at all. Forbidden curses were proof enough that a not insignificant number of mages had also fallen prey to such temptations.

And then there were the witches.

Far too mighty, their deeds—feats that should not be humanly possible—became the stuff of legends.

With the capabilities of a witch, the king of Magdalsia wished to trample over the Magic Empire that had been his neighbor for so many years.

“He’s got ambition; I’ll give him that. He’s certainly creating trouble for us,” remarked Oscar.

“Having power makes you want to use it. However, we know its limit. The Mirror of Oblivion is in the castle of Magdalsia. Destroy it, and this will be over,” Valt said, repeating his instructions as if to indicate that the conversation was over.

Oscar still had questions, though. “I heard you have memories of before the timeline changed.”

“That demon king told you that, too? He’s really ruining things for me with how much he meddles.”

“Why do you want Eleterria?” Oscar pressed.

“To change the past, of course.”

“Then wouldn’t just one orb be enough?”

“It will be meaningless without both. Shouldn’t you be hastening to your lady’s side?”

“She…doesn’t want my help,” Oscar admitted, unable to hide his bitterness.

Tinasha’s first war in four centuries and the desire to prevent Valt from predicting her actions had changed her.

But in all likelihood, she hadn’t told Oscar a thing because she didn’t want to drag him and Farsas into the conflict. Oscar had done the same to her once. On that occasion, Tinasha had provided aid secretly to help him break a forbidden curse, even though Tuldarr would have wanted to receive public credit for intervening.

Oscar wondered if his private wish to attempt something similar would be a violation of Tinasha’s choice. He thought of the distance that had formed between them. It was the proper space two rulers ought to maintain. Up until recently, Tinasha was the one bridging it, moving closer to him with an innocent smile and unguarded affection. Those qualities had made Oscar choose her to stand beside him.

And now, she would no longer lean on him, becoming again the sovereign queen who acted for her homeland. It was clear from their previous conversations that she did not require his help.

Valt sounded dismayed. “Isn’t it a little late for this? Don’t slack off just because you earned her heart so easily this time. In every other instance, you only managed to win her over after considerable effort. That she loved you from the start is unique. You need to act prudently.”

“What the hell are you talking about…?”

Valt had to be referring to previous timelines. Oscar had no recollection of doing anything worth such censure, but it also felt like the blame really did lie with him somehow. He pursed his lips.

Valt went on, his voice brimming with conviction. “This is who she really is. But she’s also her true self when she’s with you. She is not your one and only partner, but you are hers. You will always be the one who saves her. And you’re going to let her go?”

“You…certainly sound confident. It’s like you’ve witnessed it all personally.”

“Because I have. Why do you think I can predict both of your actions? I worked for you both once, in the past.”

“What?” Oscar blurted out.

Valt had infiltrated Farsas as a court mage from Yarda, a neighboring country. It wasn’t beyond conception to learn he’d worked directly for Farsas in another timeline. Tinasha was right when she’d said Valt was familiar with them. Apparently, he’d even been close with the two.

“So you’re a spy. I can’t believe I have no memory of you ever existing.”

“Think that if you like, but it isn’t as if I manipulate time at will. Back then, a farmer who lived far away from Farsas had Eleterria. The orbs changed hands many times, and I wasn’t able to follow their trail.”

“But you still remember all the previous timelines?” Oscar demanded.

Valt fell silent. After a few moments, that aura of bitterness seeped out again. “For me, the events happened a very long time ago. To you two, they never existed. However, I am well aware of how often you rescued her in many of those erased histories, and of how deeply she loves you.”

A purehearted, lonely, earnest, and ruthless woman.

What kind of person was Tinasha in another timeline? And was Oscar really her salvation?

Had she loved him regardless?

It was all ludicrous. Without meaning to, Oscar let out a heavy sigh. He hadn’t the slightest notion what parts were true. He was genuinely bewildered. Was this how a person with knowledge of lost histories spoke?

Valt continued placidly. “If you understand, then you need to get going. Now Tuldarr is… *She* is fulfilling the role, but ordinarily, you would be the one facing a witch, yes?”

“Because…of Akashia,” Oscar muttered. Possessing the royal sword made Oscar the prime candidate for vanquishing a witch.

“Go carry out your mission. Save her,” Valt instructed candidly. Too candidly.

But for some strange reason, it didn’t feel wrong. In fact, the truth of it sank through Oscar like a stone. He clenched one hand into a fist, then released it. Tinasha’s sad smile when they had bid good-bye to each other surfaced in his memory.

Oscar made up his mind, selecting the path that had always been right there for him—the road to a life with her. That decision had long since been made.

He had to be brutally honest with her to bridge the distance between them. It was no longer the Dark Age when she was a lonely queen. She had crossed four hundred years to find him.

“How dare you say she isn’t my one and only. You’ve got some nerve,” Oscar spat.

“It’s true.”

“I don’t care about something I don’t recall existing. She’s the only one for me, and I’ll prove it,” Oscar proclaimed, sheathing Akashia and heading for the door. Before exiting, he turned back to the empty room. “And someday, I’m going to pay you back in full for what you did.”

Valt offered no reply. He only chuckled, sounding both amused and perturbed. Then his faint aura faded from the room entirely.

After watching Oscar leave the room from a distant vantage point, Valt let out a long sigh. Undoing his spell, he sank into a chair.

The fifth witch was not the king of Farsas’s only partner. In many timelines, he never met her and married other women instead.

Still, Valt knew better than anyone that Oscar was the most attached to Tinasha out of all of them. Because of that, he had been given the opportunity to go after her once more.

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The army marched on through the night as if possessed, and when the lights of a village came into view, the procession halted. The settlement sat in southwestern Tuldarr, close to the Magdalsian border. The general in command of the vanguard battalion hissed to his troops. “Kill the villagers. Watch out for any mages mixed in. Don’t let a single person escape. Stack up the food in the center of town.”

The soldiers nodded. Despite the vast power difference, none showed any fear over challenging a Great Nation. They were like expressionless dolls.

“Let’s go,” the general ordered, and the soldiers kicked their horses into a gallop.

A woman floating in the sky observed all this with delight. She had curly light-brown hair and amber eyes. Her brilliant beauty contrasted with the cruel smile on her lips. While she called herself Lucia, the soul controlling her body was not hers.

Unable to suppress his glee, the king whispered in her voice, “So this is how Tuldarr falls…”

Magdalsia’s glorious and prosperous neighbor had flourished for many years with its power and expertise, inciting jealousy all the while. The king envied how Tuldarr could thrive so much compared to his own land, where nothing ever changed. So when power fell in his lap, his first desire was to stomp out that irksome thorn to the north. He had whipped all of this together in a short time, because Tuldarr would notice if he delayed. Having the country’s ruler operate under the delusion that the king of Magdalsia was comatose and that a mystery woman had usurped the nation was best.

There was no time like the present. Starting today, he would remake the history of the entire mainland.

As the king surveyed the terrain below through Lucia’s eyes, he realized that he hadn’t heard any screams or weapons clashing.

Immediately after, a mage in the ground battalion contacted him telepathically.

"The village is empty! No one is here!"

"What…?"

Lucia's beautiful face twisted into a scowl. Then a white light flooded the entire village; the king lifted his arms to cover his face. The light persisted for half a minute, turning the landscape as bright as day. But when it vanished, the king found that his connection to the mage on the ground had been cut and that the troops there had vanished as well.

"How many did we catch?" asked Tinasha. The queen was in her command center.

"A little over a thousand with all three villages combined," reported Renart, and Tinasha nodded.

When she learned that Magdalsia's army was on the march, the first thing she did was lay a trap close to the border. Once her sensors notified her that the Magdalsian troops had crossed the border, she evacuated the villagers and set up a spell in their place that would trigger once the enemy troops broke in. The spell was one of Tinasha's devising and had two primary effects—it would put all living beings in the vicinity to sleep, and then it would forcibly teleport them away after a few seconds. The Magdalsian soldiers had attempted to slaughter defenseless villagers, only to fall into Tuldarr's ploy.

"What should we do with the soldiers we teleported?" inquired Renart. "At the moment, they are being held within a barrier."

"Their mind control should wear off by the time they wake up. If they fight back, kill them. I'm hoping to defeat the witch before that happens, though." Tinasha leaned back in her chair as she observed the map hung in her war tent.

Most of the soldiers in this war were victims, except the instigator of all of it, the witch. Tinasha preferred to release the troops unharmed, but she *would* kill them if necessary.

Her top priority was the people of Tuldarr, and she couldn't afford to forget it.

The queen, clad in black mage's garb as her battle attire, issued her orders with a dispassionate face.

Tuldarr's last war was the great one fought against Tayiri four centuries ago. Magdalsia had no more experience in battle than Tuldarr. Farsas and other countries situated in the center of the mainland were constantly fighting off enemies, so their forces were battle-hardened and well-trained, but Tuldarr and Magdalsia had enjoyed peace since the end of the Dark Age.

And while that had made them very fortunate and blessed indeed, it also meant they were unreliable in a crisis.

However, Tuldarr had Tinasha.

Even a witch would come to learn what it was like to square off against a country focused on magic. This was what Tinasha had been preparing for this whole time.

Initially, she had intended to go alone and wipe out the witch. But when she thought about the future of her country, she decided to take a different approach.

Oscar's objections hadn't swayed Tinasha's decision. This was her best chance while she was still queen to let the world know what it meant to war with Tuldarr. She would etch Tuldarr's singular power onto the pages of history so that none would think of challenging it for at least another few hundred years. She also wanted the soldiers and mages of Tuldarr that she would be leaving behind to gain combat experience.

Tinasha chose to sacrifice a minor nation manipulated by a witch for the benefit of her homeland.

"Now that they'll think twice before setting foot in another village, I suppose it's time for the next stage of the plan. Please make ready," Tinasha ordered, getting to her feet. Her advisers stared at her with fear and awe as she strode out of the tent with a sheathed sword.

Once she was outside, she drew the thin rapier. The enchanted blade glimmered a faint purple. It had originally belonged to the Farsas treasure vault, but Oscar told her no one was using it and gave it to her. She would wield it as a weapon that could function both as a blade and as a spell catalyst.

With her naked blade in one hand, Tinasha surveyed her troops. They had made camp on a grassy plain sloping gently south at the exact halfway point between Tuldarr's capital and the southwestern border.

As commanded by Tinasha, the Tuldarr army in its arc formation numbered close to forty thousand in order to match Magdalsia's thirty thousand.

It would've been dangerous to have fewer troops than the enemy, while too many would lead to others writing the victory off as one achieved by numbers alone. Therefore, this was the safest course. This force was still sizable enough to engage without needing to resort to deceptive tactics anyhow.

"All that's left is to see how she teleports in."

There were three main types of magical teleportation: individual teleportation, teleportation portals, and transportation arrays.

When a mage wished to warp away, they would use individual teleportation magic to disappear and then reappear at a destination.

Teleporting other people required opening a portal. The spell to create a portal was a grade of difficulty higher than that for individual teleportation, but it could be used in many ways. However, the farther the distance to the destination, the more magic and spell configuration power it took, and multiple coordinates for the target location were required to make a larger portal.

The final type was a transportation array, a spell seared into the ground as a permanent installation. It allowed non-mages to warp away at any time without the mage who wove the magic. However, such arrays needed regular maintenance and had to be continuously charged with magical power. This meant that locations connected by the spell had to authorize its installation or it would be almost impossible to set up.

In wartime, transportation arrays were employed regularly, as they allowed armies to warp from a fortress or castle to the national border and deploy for battle without consuming a mage's power.

However, once out on the battlefield, there were no transportation arrays. Mages who possessed other countries' large-scale teleportation coordinates were scarce, and such information was necessary to make an array. Similarly, almost no one had the required magic to open a massive portal, making it impractical on all fronts.

After considering all this, Tinasha decided that a witch would probably deploy her army using teleportation. The longer the march, the greater the physical toll. It also increased the risk of being waylaid en route.

Teleporting solved those issues and allowed the enemy to sneak into Tuldarr. Tinasha had set her trap assuming the witch would think the same way.

Tinasha expanded the defensive wards of cities that were both close to the capital and near locations that could accommodate an army of thirty thousand. She did this with every settlement except for two. Then she laid out a network of lightly cloaked patrol spells and sprinkled tiny pebbles all around that would deter any mage from wanting to teleport into the terrain.

This ensured that there were only two places an army could appear—the plains to the east or the ruins of the old castle city to the south.

Tinasha believed that there was a 60 percent chance that Magdalsia's army would teleport in via a portal and an 80 percent chance that said portal would lead to one of those two places.

"If they march in normally, we can use that time to change our formation. But if they teleport—"

Before Tinasha could finish her sentence, the air in the middle of the grassy plains warped.

The source of the disturbance was just beyond where her army was stationed. A buzz and a frisson of tension ran through the troops.

Sweeping her sword to one side, Tinasha teleported to the center of the vanguard.

Cast in the moonlight, the queen floated up into the air and drew all eyes to her.

Before the distorting space, Tinasha turned back to face her forces.

"Soldiers of Tuldarr, do not be afraid. I promise you victory. No matter who our enemy is, we will not allow them to invade our lands. Now show me your strength!"

Her orders were as clear as crystal, seeping into every fighter present. An exuberant roar erupted from the Tuldarr army. Here and there, soldiers offered morale-boosting cheers and praise for the queen.

Tinasha gave a little smile and turned to face the warping in the air. It spread rapidly, tearing a hole in the atmosphere with a high-pitched ringing.

After a moment, a large force appeared on the grassy field.

With the Tuldarr army deployed in a crescent shape, the Magdalsian troops were surrounded on three sides. The invaders surveyed the situation and then froze. Undoubtedly, they had expected to appear from the witch's portal on the eastern plains. However, it was there that another portal had brought them here.

Immediately, Magdalsia's soldiers found themselves fenced in. Moreover, the grassland was a gentle slope, and the Tuldarr side was positioned on the higher ground. Clearly, Magdalsia's forces had warped into a trap. An ordinary army might have fallen into a panic.

The Magdalsian troops were still partially under the witch's control, so the soldiers overcame their moment of stupefaction quickly and drew their swords.

Innumerable white blades caught the moonlight and sparkled like an ocean.

Tinasha frowned. "So they really are just puppets under her control. I had heard she specialized in psychological magic, but controlling an entire army is certainly no easy feat."

"What do we do, Your Majesty?"

"We follow the plan," Tinasha replied coolly.

The enemy soldiers attempted to gallop up the grassy field on horseback. Eyeing them placidly, the queen lifted her sword. On that cue, all the Tuldarr mages fed magic into a spell.

A net of lightning flashed across the meadow, scattering sparks into the night.

Screams mingled with electrical crackles as soldiers and horses toppled onto the ground in succession. The queen beheld the display with a blank expression.

The spell was a large-scale one designed to knock out the troops who had fallen into the trap. Tinasha had chosen this method partly because killing mind-controlled warriors would affect her army's morale, and also because it was safer to take on stunned opponents. Battles between mages largely entailed setting lots of ploys in advance. If a mage had to have a battle, it was preferable that it proceeded according to a plan. The war with Tayiri four hundred years ago had been much the same—except for the part where a witch showed up.

Rendered immobile, the capable number of Magdalsian troops dwindled swiftly. Relief spread throughout the Tuldarr army as its soldiers watched it happen.

And that was when a powerful rush of magic burst open overhead.

"Wha—?!"

Mages who had been concentrating on the large-scale spell yelped and stood aghast, doubting their eyes.

"What in the world is *that*?!" someone exclaimed.

Out of the darkness emerged a gigantic red hand, large enough to grab hold of a castle spire. It slammed down toward the Tuldarr troops as if crushing a bug.

Soldiers screamed as the front lines fell apart.

The army was ready to flee the terrifying scene when their queen strode forward and called out in a ringing, far-reaching voice, "It's an illusion. Do not falter."

To verify her claim, Tinasha swung her sword, and the red hand vanished without a trace. The night returned to normal.

However, the huge mass of magic in the air only emanated more bloodlust.

Tinasha turned her head to look behind her. "All right, it looks like the star of our show has finally arrived. Renart, please handle the rest."

"I wish you the utmost luck in battle, Your Majesty," Renart replied, bowing deeply.

Scornful laughter rained down from the sky. "Will you ever tire of these petty tricks? Do you really think a so-called Queen of Tuldarr can win against a witch?"

"Of course I do. I'll make sure history remembers this," Tinasha replied, launching up into the inky sky. Another woman floated there in waiting, barely visible against the ebon darkness.

Moonlight glinted off the woman's light-brown hair, turning it silver. She wore a belligerent smile. "If you'd only sit there and look pretty, you'd make a lovely doll. I'll train that insolence out of you, make you my slave, and keep you as a beloved pet."

"Which of us needs training, I wonder? If you want me, pay with your life," Tinasha shot back. She wasted no time casting a spell with her left hand. Once launched overhead, the straightforward yet powerful magic manifested.

A fierce wave of power shook the atmosphere, so strong that Tris ducked. While she was still young enough that other mages objected to her taking part in the battle, she refused to back down. Ultimately, she had been permitted to fight under the condition that she keep away from the front lines.

The Tuldarr army's vanguard was beating a swift retreat. The majority of the Magdalsian soldiers had been neutralized already. Tinasha's plan called for everyone to fall back once the witch showed herself.

Tris stood at the very rear of Tuldarr's forces, closest to the castle city. Wind whipped past, howling in her ears, and she peered into the sky. The

unmistakable hum of beating wings was growing louder. When she scanned for the source, she spied a great black shadow approaching.

“What is that…?” Hastily, Tris began drawing a spell, but the spirit next to her stopped her.

“Wait. That’s Nark.”

“What? Do you know that thing?” Tris asked, frowning at the unfamiliar name. Still, she dismissed her magic, allowing the dragon to glide in close and land in front of her. A man jumped off its gigantic back.

Pamyra came running from her position in the army, drawn by this latest arrival. When the man caught sight of her, he asked, “Is Tinasha here?”

“Yes, but she’s battling the witch…”

“Battling already, huh? Where?”

“In the sky above the front line.”

“Why do they always love to go flying? I guess I can’t talk to her, then,” said Oscar.

“You can,” corrected Eir, who was nearby.

Oscar threw him a look of surprise. “I see. Using a spirit…? I’d appreciate that, but it might distract her from the fight.”

“It’s probably fine. She issued orders to the army while fighting a witch four hundred years ago,” Eir informed him.

After a sigh, Oscar responded, “She really doesn’t know how to be ordinary, does she? All right then, let me talk to her.” Eir nodded and opened up a spell around Oscar. The girl next to him was so nervous that her knees were knocking together.

Overhead, a ray of red light shot through the heavens.

What made witches so terrifying wasn’t their great power—it was the spells and experience they had honed over their long lives. At least that was how Tinasha saw it. The most frightening thing of all was the unknown.

However, the woman before her was different. She poured tremendous magic into the simplest constructs.

Of course, the illusions and psychological contamination magic she employed between regular attack spells were very high level, but they were nothing that Tinasha couldn’t fend off, prepared as she was to take on a witch.

If this is all she’s got, I can kill her.

This one was nowhere near the caliber of either the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned, Leonora, or the Witch of Silence, Lavinia.

Dodging a torrent of light that came racing her way, Tinasha taunted, “Is that all you’ve got? Once you’re out of steam, I’ll kill you.”

“Damn you,” snarled the witch, an ugly look twisting her fine features.

Tinasha was very well acquainted with that look—the hatred and loathing in a would-be assassin’s eyes upon realizing they couldn’t defeat the queen. She had walked a long road paved with the blood of such people.

She felt no anguish about it, then or now. The weak perished on the battlefield. That was how it was.

However, Tinasha did have something she wanted to know. Fixing her dark eyes right on the other woman, she asked, “Do you know where Senn went?”

She recalled what he’d said to her when she was a young girl.

“If you ever get tired of it all, you should go visit her. She’s a troublemaker, but…I know she’d make a good friend for you.”

Senn’s lover, the one he said was free-spirited, capricious, and affectionate.

It was hard to link that description with the person Tinasha was battling. However, this woman had come to see Senn every time he manifested, which meant she had to be a long-lived witch.

And that suggested she could be responsible for Senn’s disappearance.

Tinasha kept herself alert as she awaited a reply, on guard all the while.

Yet the woman only gave her a suspicious frown. “Senn? What’s that?”

“My spirit. You are the Witch of the Forbidden Forest, aren’t you?”

That question prompted an unnatural pause. Before Tinasha could repeat her inquiry, Lucia’s red lips curled. “Yes. I’m a witch.”

She didn’t offer her true name or her witch title. Lavinia had been that way as well.

Tinasha pressed on. “Senn knew you, so you captured him to prevent him from telling me who you really are, didn’t you? What have you done with Senn?”

The woman gave an overly affected shrug. “Who knows?” Her disdainful response caused Tinasha to pause.

It was obvious that Lucia didn’t intend to give an honest reply, and hounding her anyway would only put Tinasha at a disadvantage. She was in the middle of a battle, and her opponent commanded an enemy army. It was better to prioritize her country, not her personal feelings.

Thus Tinasha declared, “Then I need nothing more from you. You will die here.”

In all honesty, it would have been infinitely better had things never reached this point. Senn was like family to Tinasha, and the witch was undoubtedly an important person in his life, just like how the younger Tinasha had valued the Oscar who rescued her.

It broke Tinasha’s heart to eliminate someone like that while Senn was unaware. Perhaps if she and Lucrezia had met centuries ago, things wouldn’t have turned out like this.

There was little point in waxing sentimental about preferring not to kill the witch, however.

Tinasha sucked in a sharp breath. Her vision grew crisp and clear.

The other woman attempted to cast a spell in the dark sky, but it was only a simple attack spell. She would be crushed by a greater power, and this would be the end.

“Wane, o ring. Let your circulation break off, and your fingertips corrode away. Your remaining thoughts shall be eternal and bring you awareness from beyond.”

Suppressing her emotions, the queen cast a spell with her right hand, intoning the words with a dispassionate tone.

“Tinasha.”

“Eek!” she yelped, her half-formed magic dispersing. “Wh-what do you want, Oscar?!”

Why had he interrupted her out of the blue, and why did she hear his voice when he wasn’t here?

Fortunately, Tinasha snapped out of her shock quickly and scrambled to dispatch the spheres of light flying her way.

Infusing her voice with magic, Tinasha went on, “Why are you…? Why are you using Eir to speak to me? Why are you here?”

“Just listen to me. That witch isn’t who you think. It’s the king of Magdalsia.”

“What?”

“The real witch’s soul is locked inside the Mirror of Oblivion, and so is that mystical spirit of yours. You need to go to Magdalsia, find the mirror, and destroy it. That will return the witch to normal.”

“What…? Where is all this coming from?” Tinasha responded. This was so abrupt that she found it hard to believe. However, Oscar had proved before that he bore a keen intuition for falsehoods. He would never offer unverified information at such a critical juncture.

Once more, Tinasha sized up the enemy floating across from her in the sky.

Why were the spells the witch used so simple? Why had she appeared after the king fell into a coma? Why was her note written in the king’s handwriting? Why was she so desperate to seize authority over the country? It all made sense if the king of Magdalsia was in control of the witch’s body.

Instead of the spell she’d been preparing when Oscar contacted her, Tinasha cast a simple one with no incantation. As she released it as a feint, she asked coldly, “Who told you all of this?”

“Valt.”

“Whaaaaaaat?!”

“I know what you’re thinking. Just go to Magdalsia and find that mirror. If the spirit really is inside it, you can hear everything from him and decide whether or not to break the mirror then. If it doesn’t look like you can find it, just teleport out of there immediately.”

“……”

Find Senn and learn the truth—she did want to do that if possible. Unfortunately, the situation didn’t allow for it.

“I’m in the middle of a battle… I can’t just leave,” Tinasha pointed out.

“I’ll take over.”

“Excuse me? This is Tuldarr’s war. You can’t just join in; this has nothing to do with you! It’s out of the question. I appreciate the information, but you need to return to Farsas.”

“No.”

“I’m going to get very mad, you know,” Tinasha warned. If Oscar was speaking through Eir, that meant he was here on the battlefield. Had he even considered his position before rushing in? Oscar could be as stubborn as he liked in their private lives as Tinasha’s husband, but being a king meant drawing some firm lines. Quelling her desire to yell at him, Tinasha snapped, “I am not your wife. I am the Queen of Tuldarr, and I won’t permit you to interfere.”

“The battle is mostly won already, isn’t it? All that’s left is fighting the witch and cleaning everything up. I’m only proposing that I help bring things to an end in a way you’ll agree with.”

“I can’t twist the situation and prioritize what I ‘agree with.’”

That would be tantamount to letting her personal desire to find Senn and learn the truth take over. Tinasha would only indulge in that after settling things here. As the ruler of Tuldarr, she controlled this conflict and refused to relinquish that.

No one could replace Tinasha. Four centuries ago, she had operated alone. While her spirits were like family, they did not offer opinions to their queen and master. They were demons in human territory, after all. Likewise, Tinasha’s mortal supporters obeyed their queen’s orders to the letter. Tuldarr leaned on its ruler as a pillar, and Tinasha had lived nineteen years in that system, never straying from it.

“A ruler is the cog in the machine that keeps the country running smoothly. That machine must not be weakened by any personal feelings.”

Oscar had once called Tinasha spoiled for not understanding how to rely on other people, and that may have been true. Yes, she trusted him. She knew that he would always be there to help if he was able.

However, Tinasha rejected that assistance. This was her duty, and she couldn’t share it with anyone else. She was the only one left who knew just how stifling the Dark Age had been.

While shooting down the witch’s attacks, Tinasha closed her eyes. The young queen in her memory was telling her to refuse.

Doubt led to weakness. There could be no faltering here. Tinasha had to harden herself and be ruthless.

“Even what’s most important—can be forgotten.”

Tinasha crossed her arms, and red blades shot out from them, arcing through the air toward the witch. Lucia released luminous bolts to intercept them, but the red blades wove around the counterattack deftly and closed in.

“You little brat!” the witch spat, and she teleported away. She wasn’t swift enough to escape completely, though. One of Tinasha’s blades cut

deep into her arm, reaching down to the bone. The sight of the deep gash caused Tinasha's face to scrunch up.

If the soul inside her isn't really the witch…

Who was trying to kill her now? Who was the enemy and who wasn't?

Doubts snuck in, but Tinasha exhaled them, turning her mind away from those ideas.

"I understand what you're saying. But we're in a different time period now. You don't have to bear every burden all alone. Better to lean on me than regret it later."

She had to shut down her mind.

"And I'll share those burdens with you for the rest of our lives."

Tinasha bit her lip.

She had never spurned solitude. It was her cradle, there with her from her earliest memories—a membrane that covered her always. It was natural to her, and she felt nothing about it.

But the only time she had cried from loneliness and let out all the feelings she couldn't hold in any longer, there had been a man who promised her it would all get better.

And so, she had traveled four centuries to reach him.

So why did she want to cry again now?

"The mirror is an outsiders' artifact. You are the only one who can break it. You have to go."

Tinasha didn't answer, instead casting spell after spell dispiritedly.

"Trust me. I'll figure this out for you."

Four hundred years ago wasn't such a long time for Tinasha. She had been asleep for it all, so it felt no longer than a year.

Every day since waking had been fun. She wasn't alone, and she got to be happy. He really had kept his promise.

"But I…"

Tinasha's eyes grew hot, and she closed them. No matter how happy her days were, she was the one outlier from another era who didn't belong.

She couldn't forget that, nor could she change it. When called, she had to rise from her warm place and do what was necessary. She had to choose a lifestyle befitting her position.

It should have been simple. It was all she knew.

Tears spilled from between Tinasha's long black eyelashes. She didn't know why she was crying, but it seemed to her that everything she'd carried with her this whole time was melting away bit by bit and turning into sobs.

Tinasha sucked in a hot breath. "No matter how crude her spells are, normal people have no way of resisting psychological magic."

"I'm only going to be buying time, so I'll manage somehow. I just need you to agree to it."

With a leap, Tinasha soared through the air. Razors came speeding for her, and she deployed an array of glowing spheres to block each one.

What is the real witch like?

She knew that these objects of the world's fear and abhorrence were, in fact, just human beings.

Yet could Tinasha allow herself to waver and to rely on him? Would it not be equivalent to weighing her country and a single man against everything else? The gamble was far too unbalanced. It was much safer to kill the witch here and search for the mirror afterward.

Tinasha used her sword to hurl a spell and watched the woman offset it with one of her own, a look of loathing on her face.

Pale moonlight flooded the grassy plains. With one eye on the beautiful vista, Tinasha thought about her missing spirit.

Why was he sealed in the mirror with the witch? What did the witch mean to him?

Tinasha had no answer at present.

Still, anyone could be someone else's salvation, just as one man had saved her.

As long as they honored that relationship.

"Lean on me. I want to repay you for what you did during the Druza situation."

His voice sank deep into her. She looked out over the rolling landscape that stretched far into the distance. Out here, there was no division between one time period and the next.

"What if…you hold out until I break the mirror and the real witch returns to her body and tries to kill you? What would you do then?"

"I would kill her with Akashia. That's its purpose."

"……"

Just as Tuldarr was strong enough to handle forbidden curses, the Akashia swordsman was a match for mages. And witches were no exception to that. They were Oscar's natural enemies.

Similarly, Tinasha believed him the only one capable of defeating *her*.

There could be no finer substitute for her.

Tinasha wiped her tears.

He had given her an option she would not have normally had, and with it, she would make a new decision.

Words infused with power held the night spellbound.

"I command all spirits who hear my voice. I give you two orders. One is to avoid death. The other is to treat the Akashia swordsman as your temporary master and aid him. Reply to me that you understand."

After a beat, eleven spirits voiced their acceptance of her orders.

Nodding, Tinasha sheathed her sword and eyed the ground below. The Tuldarr army had withdrawn, leaving only the spirits and a man gazing up at her.

He had eyes bluer than the evening sky.

Her one and only.

Oscar's hand was outstretched to Tinasha with that same warmth that always gave her strength.

The witch hurled a magic attack aimed for Tinasha, who negated it with a simple wave of her hand. Then she took a breath and teleported away.

When she reappeared, she was standing next to another ruler.

Oscar glanced down at Tinasha and smiled. With his off hand, he wiped away the tears on her cheeks. "Crybaby."

"Shut up."

"Are you running from me, little girl?" the witch called from above. Both Tinasha and Oscar looked up at her.

Evidently recognizing the man next to Tinasha, the witch blanched. "The king of Farsas… The bearer of Akashia! Did you call him here because you knew you couldn't defeat me?"

"No, but you're close," replied Tinasha.

The witch snorted and descended toward the ground. She eyed Oscar judgmentally as she reached a level no higher than his head. "Stripling, are you so besotted with this woman that you're willing to interfere in others' business? She's too scrawny to whet my appetite, but I'll train her until that body's got more worth showing."

The lascivious leer on the witch's beautiful features made Oscar and Tinasha exchange a glance. The latter whispered, "How crass…"

"That's how men's minds work. And he's a pervert," replied the former.

"What are you mumbling about? Would you like to learn just how powerful a witch is?"

Hubert, king of Magdalsia, lifted the witch's arms high. Acquiring this body had also given him access to all the ways it could use its power. He could make whatever he wanted into reality. And once he realized the extent of his new strength…humans seemed so very weak and insignificant.

Nothing was beyond him. He could mold the world to be as he wished. People often dubbed the current era the Age of Witches. Were that true, then why didn't the witches take center stage if they possessed this much power? They should've done whatever they pleased. If they had the capability, why not dominate?

"Watch, because I'm going to gobble you up," Hubert declared with a laugh.

Then the earsplitting din of thousands of wings flapping descended over the plain. A swarm of insects whirled into a vortex with Oscar and Tinasha at the eye.

While Oscar boggled at the sight, Tinasha took hold of his left hand. "Listen to me. Psychological magic takes root by manipulating the senses. It uses sight, sound, smell, and touch to hijack your sense of reality and burrow into your psyche."

Her hand was small and warm. Despite the buzzing cacophony, her voice was clear.

“Don’t let your senses drift too far away. They will be your lifeline and your weapon. Trust your intuition so you can identify the truth. You are stronger than a witch.”

“Got it,” Oscar said, and as he did, the raging horde of insects vanished soundlessly. It had all been a hallucination.

While Oscar blinked in mild surprise, Tinasha gave him a fond smile. “I won’t be liable if you get yourself killed.”

“We’re not even married yet. I can’t die now. I’d have too many regrets.”

“Well, it sounds like you’re feeling ready. I’m glad. In that case, get going. Please help me.”

“Of course. Your wish is my command.”

Tinasha gave his hand one last squeeze. Then she released him and leaped into the sky. Swift as a teleport, she shot up to Hubert and passed right by him. “He’ll be your opponent now. I’ll see you again later.”

“You little…”

Hubert whirled to fling a spell at her, but the queen was already gone. Hubert faced Oscar, grinding his teeth in frustration over his lovely prey having escaped. “It’s no fun playing with a man. Well, no matter. I’ll make sure to leave your head intact so I can show that woman how insolent you are.”

“Big talk from someone on borrowed power. Your facade has already cracked wide open.”

“……”

“Good thing you invaded her country. If it were mine, I would have slaughtered all your toy soldiers without any mercy at all.”

Hubert’s face twisted; his false witch persona had crumbled. The witch’s creamy pale skin turned an ugly dark red. Her lips, which should’ve been curved in an alluring smile, spasmed.

“Insolent little wretch… Let’s see if you can still say that when you’re ripped into a thousand pieces.”

Beneath the azure moon, a dragon circled the sky. As its huge black shadow skimmed over the plains below, the two kings faced each other.

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Magdalsia was an agricultural nation, and most of its citizens were farmers. Almost none of the houses had their lights on this late.

The only light came from windows in the castle walls. As Tinasha surveyed Magdalsia Castle from high in the air, she began a slow descent.

The magical probes she had sent out didn’t detect anything. The mirror was probably cloaked. If it were in the castle, it would be in the treasure vault or the king’s personal chambers. Catching someone and making them show her the way was likely better than searching blindly.

Tinasha selected a window in the farthest back room she could find and opened it with magic. The furnishings in the dark chamber were all lavish

but lacked any evidence of use. She exited into a hallway lit by a flickering candelabra and broke into a run. A guard happened to be patrolling at the opposite end of the corridor.

Naturally, the watchman was stunned to see Tinasha, but she teleported to him before he could cry out. His body went rigid as the flat of her sword pressed against his throat. “Show me to the king’s rooms. I’ve muted your voice, so you won’t be able to call for help. You know what will happen if you resist, don’t you?”

The man could only gasp for air like a fish as this unbelievably beautiful woman threatened him with truly unsettling words. He was powerless to reply, only panting and exhaling.

Tinasha gave him a beatific smile. “Now that you understand, run. I’m in a hurry.”

She waved a hand, and a life-size statue in the hallway broke into pieces.

The soldier rushed to nod and repeatedly bow before setting off at a trot for the king’s rooms. Tinasha effortlessly knocked out any guards and ladies-in-waiting they passed along the way. When they finally reached the king’s chambers, she knocked out that guard as well. Drawing her sword, she entered the chamber.

At first glance, it was utterly ordinary. The space was more furnished than Oscar’s chambers, but that was due to the difference in personalities, not wealth. Tinasha swept her gaze around the area before venturing in deeper.

In the center of the bedroom sat a bed with a silk canopy. She walked right up to it and tore through the curtains with her sword. On the bed lay King Hubert’s soulless body, sustained by magic. Close inspection revealed that his chest was rising and falling.

“Ugh. What a conceited old fool,” Tinasha muttered. While she felt like lashing out, she didn’t have time for that. She began the search for the mirror; the only sound in the chamber the incapacitated man’s breathing.

The door opened, and Tinasha quickly looked over her shoulder to find Queen Gemma. Gasping, Tinasha began a spell instinctively but soon stopped herself. The queen was rooted to the floor, staring at the intruder with astonishment, and the light of reason in her eyes indicated that she was herself and not a controlled puppet.

As Gemma stood frozen, Tinasha faced her properly. “Do you know why I’m here?”

“I-I’m so sorry… The king…won’t listen to me…”

“I understand. I’m going to bring him back, but I need you to tell me where the mirror is. Do you know?”

Judging by the queen’s behavior, Hubert had probably informed her of everything after he’d chased Tinasha out under the guise of Lucia. Gemma was undoubtedly feeling extremely confused over everything. Her husband had taken over a witch’s body and mobilized the troops to attack the Great Nation next door. No wonder Queen Gemma looked like an exhausted shell

of herself. Tinasha hadn't known King Hubert prior to all of this, but Legis had described him as a normal sort of ruler. He would go down in history as a prime example of how too much power could change someone all too easily.

Gemma hesitated to answer, but she could likely sense Tinasha's cutthroat determination. As her eyes quivered with fear, she pointed to the back of the chamber. "I-in that room…"

There was indeed a small door there, which Tinasha had dismissed as an entrance to a closet or the like. Nodding to the queen, Tinasha headed for it and broke the lock with magic. Sending some magic lights into the dark room, Tinasha stepped in and immediately discovered a stone pedestal draped with scarlet cashmere.

Atop the stand rested an ancient oval mirror that showed a dull reflection of the magic lights in the air. Tinasha gazed at it with trepidation.

An outsiders' artifact, a thing that runs counter to all laws.

Knowing what she did now about these items, this looking glass seemed dreadfully unfathomable and terrifying.

Still, she couldn't falter now. She drew a deep breath.

"Ah…"

Gemma breathed from behind Tinasha, voice trembling. Tinasha was about to warn the other queen to stand back for fear of danger when a burning heat seared her left flank. Tinasha was confused for a second before a sharp pain kicked in.

"Aaaahh!"

Reflexively, she doubled over. Pressing a hand to her side, she discovered a slender dagger, the sort concealed for self-defense, embedded deep in her torso. Gemma had stabbed Tinasha from behind, and she stared at the Queen of Tuldarr with eyes full of terror. Trembling, she managed to say, "If you release the witch…the king will…"

But that was all she got out before fleeing.

Tinasha couldn't do a thing to stop Gemma. Her body was swiftly growing cold, and she collapsed to her knees in a puddle of blood.

※

The Tuldarr mages, stationed some distance away, stared in horror at the tornado that had abruptly formed on the grassy plain. Only a few knew that the king of Farsas stood before it.

The wielder of the royal sword, who was battling the witch in place of his fiancée, didn't seem fazed at all as he watched the oncoming tornado.

"That one's not a hallucination," Oscar remarked.

"Doesn't look like it," agreed Eir, who was next to him. The spirit sounded just as emotionless and nonchalant as Oscar. Their conversation made it hard to believe they were up against a witch.

Giving Akashia a light swing, Oscar asked, "Can you get rid of it?"

“Hmm. Three or four of us should be able to. Give the order.”

“I don’t know everyone’s names, though. All right then, Mila, how about you pick the team for me?”

Mila wasn’t physically present, but her voice sounded in the air as she gave compliance. A few seconds later, the tornado dispersed.

Nark flew back over. The dragon had been keeping a safe distance from the tornado.

Across the field, now utterly still without so much as a breeze, Hubert’s eyes glinted with rage. “Queen’s spirits! How dare you insolent little monsters intervene! Show yourselves!”

“He seems pretty mad. You guys should retreat for now,” Oscar said in a blasé tone, and the spirits obeyed. Only Eir remained. Because Oscar was protected by an anti-magic barrier, almost all direct spells bounced off him. But he was still susceptible to psychological magic and the aftereffects of anything conjured. By this point, he had endured several illusions, all of which had been defeated by his unusually acute intuition.

“The hardest part is staying alive without killing him,” Oscar muttered as he held Akashia at the ready. When he glanced down at his beloved sword, he frowned to find that its hilt had become a white snake. The serpent raised its head to strike, but Oscar just gave it a careless shake. When he looked back at Hubert, he found three burning spheres heading for him.

Oscar leaped forward to evade the flames that singed the air as they sped past and blocked his escape. He thrust out with the sword, its hilt still a snake.

“Don’t you realize how many years I’ve had this?”

The sword destroyed the first fire sphere. Oscar took a step back and broke the other coming from the left as well. For the third, Oscar stabbed the length of Akashia into the flames to pierce and shatter the spell’s core.

Even if the entire sword looked like a snake, Oscar still knew the length, width, and weight of it.

But after dispatching the attacks with almost disappointing swiftness, Oscar felt his vision go dark, and he stopped where he was. The moonlight and the distant lights all died, leaving the plain in total darkness. Oscar cursed himself for having fallen into his enemy’s trap.

Then he reasoned, “Well, it’s kind of a fun challenge now that it’s dark.”

Closing his eyes for a moment, he recalled what Tinasha had told him—to not let his senses get too distant. They were his lifeline and his weapon.

Mocking laughter filled the darkness. “Do you enjoy the little world I’ve created?”

After heaving a disgusted sigh, Oscar readied Akashia—now back to normal—and took a step forward. “It’s pitch-black. But maybe it actually isn’t? Eir, are you there?”

Although the spirit had been beside Oscar moments earlier, there was no reply.

Oscar gave a light tap to the ground in front of him. It seemed solid. Then he sensed something and dodged a step to the left. Something sharp whizzed by.

He scratched his head with his off hand. “I just need to focus on not dying. That’ll be easy enough.”

“Easy? Have you lost your mind and deluded yourself into believing you can win?”

“I haven’t, so don’t worry about it,” Oscar retorted.

Taking it to be a bluff, Hubert let out a delighted laugh. “Allow me to show you the most traumatic memory of your youth.”

At the edge of the darkness, a light flared to life as though someone had lit a lantern. Oscar frowned, squinting at the sight. Then he slowly moved toward it.

In the light, a woman lay facedown in a pool of blood that oozed out from her onto the floor. Oscar approached his mother’s corpse and stared down at it. He didn’t know what expression his mother had worn when she’d died; he hadn’t seen it.

If he turned her over, he would learn. Oscar snorted at the deluded notion. This hallucination came from his own memories. It couldn’t include something he didn’t remember.

There was nothing to think about.

Oscar sharpened his vision to a fine point, then honed it even further. Amid the darkness, the faintest outlines of interlocking spells revealed themselves.

He took another step in, past his mother’s body, and swept Akashia through an empty spot in the air.

“Preposterous!” came an astonished shout. With a tinkling of shattering glass, the darkness ruptured.

The plains returned. Oscar found that Hubert was right in front of him, but high enough above to be out of Akashia’s reach.

“You may have called up a traumatic memory, but it’s part of the past now. Showing it to me means nothing, although I guess I do feel a bit disgusted. Once you’re back in your original body, I’m going to kill you.”

Hubert glanced down at the witch’s belly, where the tip of Akashia had grazed the skin. The moment Oscar had readied his blade, Hubert had fled instinctively, yet the cut had been too quick to evade completely.

Hubert’s arms were trembling. “Why, you little…horrid brat…”

“Go on, go on,” Oscar teased as he checked his off hand to ensure the ring Tinasha had given him was there.

Killing the witch wouldn’t be too difficult. However, that wasn’t Oscar’s intention, so he mulled over other possible actions as he looked to the sky.

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The smell of her own blood filled her nostrils.

“Ugh…”

Tinasha held her breath and yanked the dagger from her side. Suppressing a groan, she cast anesthetic and healing spells on herself.

While Gemma had probably done it without realizing, she’d twisted the dagger as she thrust, causing an unexpected amount of hemorrhaging. Tinasha’s magic couldn’t do anything about the blood loss, but she had to carry on regardless.

Keeping a hand pressed to the freshly closed wound, Tinasha stood and approached the Mirror of Oblivion. She picked it up, careful not to peer into the artifact.

“Judging by how that queen reacted, this must be the real thing…”

All that remained was to take it or destroy it right here. Tinasha hoped to verify something first, though.

While channeling some of her magic through the looking glass, she asked, “Senn, can you hear me?”

The inside of the mirror felt like a bottomless pit. Tinasha’s magic kept sinking deeper and deeper with no end. That highly unusual sensation proved that the mirror was certainly no ordinary tool.

Valt had said to destroy it, but was that the right thing to do? Even if he wasn’t lying to Oscar, Valt could be wrong.

It wouldn’t do for Tinasha to delay; she had left the witch to Oscar and had to decide quickly.

Then her sunken magic reacted to something.

“Senn!” she cried, joy coloring her voice.

He really was inside it. The reaction was very weak, suggesting he was quite distant.

The mirror was a cage holding her spirit captive. Tinasha tried to apply pressure to the mirror’s exterior to see if it could be destroyed. But it didn’t yield, even when she increased the force. The artifact was abnormally sturdy. She had no choice but to withdraw her magic.

“This is going to be tough…”

Tinasha wavered for only one moment over what to do next.

She cast a barrier around the vicinity before pouring her power and consciousness into the mirror.

After closing her eyes, Tinasha expanded her magic to connect her own darkness to the looking glass’s depths. If this artifact was capable of capturing parts of the human psyche, then it had to be possible to enter it.

Careful not to detach her mind from her body, she spread her consciousness out further as she lowered a thread into the bottomless gloom—a thread that was her very soul.

No sooner did she make the attempt than her magic bumped up against a ward inside the mirror. The spell configuration, different from the one placed on the looking glass itself, forbade outside entry. The spell was so exquisitely crafted that Tinasha almost began to admire it.

“Can I break it? I suppose I have to.”

Tinasha explored the configuration, which resembled a fine mesh net. Conceptual entities like high-ranking demons could probably slip through it easily, explaining how Senn had gotten by.

All that Tinasha, a human, could do was hurriedly search for the spell's cores.

There were twelve of them arranged in a circle. After identifying the cores, she focused her energy on them and exhaled all the breath in her body.

Then she took a deep breath and held it.

"Disperse."

A short word was all it took to break the foundation of the spell configuration to pieces.

Then Tinasha's consciousness descended into the darkness alone, a darkness that was very long and seemingly unending.

But it was only a few moments before she reached the bottom, landing in a place that was utter darkness. A familiar voice called out, "My queen!"

"Senn! Oh, I'm so glad." Tinasha let out a sigh of sheer relief, but she couldn't lose focus here. Tersely, she demanded, "Tell me what's going on. Outside, Magdalsia is attacking Tuldarr, and the Witch of the Forbidden Forest seems to be behind it. She's battling Oscar now."

"The Witch of the Forbidden Forest? But she's right here."

"Ah, so the real one really is in the mirror. King Hubert of Magdalsia is in control of her body at the moment," Tinasha informed him.

Although Senn was only a presence she could sense, she could feel him scowling. "He's the one who used the mirror. It must have separated his soul from his body, but then his soul bounced off the barrier and went into Lucrezia's instead."

"Lucrezia?"

"The Witch of the Forbidden Forest."

That must have been her real name. Tinasha peered into the darkness. "Is she here now? How did she end up here?"

"She's asleep. Judging from the barrier's spell configuration, she likely put it up herself. She locked the mirror away with herself inside it. I sensed her when the seal came undone and went to check on her. When I did, I slipped through the barrier and got myself trapped inside the looking glass. Sorry for disappearing," Senn explained.

"Travis did say that these artifacts don't get along too well with high-ranking demons," Tinasha remarked.

Senn fell silent at his lady's mention of the demon king. Undoubtedly, he wore a look of disgust.

Now the problem lay with the witch Lucrezia. Was it right for Tinasha to destroy the mirror with the witch sleeping inside it?

While Tinasha waffled over what to do, Senn said, "She's right over there. If you can't see her, I'll let you look through my eyes."

At that statement, the darkness lifted. While Tinasha's surroundings didn't grow brighter, she could see around her. Senn was standing nearby, and the many other entities she detected had to be souls absorbed by the mirror, already partially destroyed. Farther beyond was a gigantic pillar that caught Tinasha's attention.

It was about as thick around as a dozen adults holding hands in a ring. It stretched so high that the top of it wasn't visible, while its base plunged through a hole in the darkness down into the depths.

The pillar itself emitted a faint white glow. Inside it floated a girl hugging her knees to her chest with her eyes closed.

"Is that…the witch?"

Her light-brown curly hair and beautiful face *were* reminiscent of Lucia's, but their ages were disparate. The sleeping girl in a pale-green dress couldn't have been older than fifteen or sixteen.

As she was locked inside a translucent pillar, she clearly wasn't an ordinary human. Tinasha felt a twinge of uneasiness to behold her.

Senn nodded. "When her soul separated from her body, it returned to the shape closest to her true essence. That pillar isn't native to the artifact. It's here to protect her."

"To protect her?" Tinasha repeated quietly, approaching the column cautiously. She craned her head up and tilted it down to observe how it stretched endlessly in both directions. A hole surrounded the edges of the pillar. She couldn't tell how far she would drop if she fell into it.

Tinasha peered into the abyss and was assailed by an abrupt sense of familiarity. “Is that…? Does that lead to the root of all negativity?”

During Cezar’s attack on Farsas, a giant snake had emerged from a sea of negativity located outside their plane of existence. The hole that the snake’s tail had been connected to and the opening around the pillar were very similar. Tinasha craned her neck upward, staring at where the end of the pillar faded out of sight.

“Is the top on a different plane of existence? Does the pillar go through multiple realms?”

Inspecting the surroundings did seem to reveal that once the mirror absorbed a human’s soul, that soul gradually lost its shape. Remnants of such eroded souls had accumulated all over. It was the natural result when one considered how closely bound the human soul and physical body were.

The witch had endured because of her strong column that passed through several planes.

“It’s like she drove a wedge into the world and fastened herself to it. I’ve never seen anything like it,” Tinasha marveled. While it had been done for self-preservation, creating such a thing within an outsiders’ artifact was an extraordinary feat. Coupled with the Witch of the Water and her unerring fortunes, it was no wonder these long-lived women were considered frightful witches. Their power went far beyond the realm of standard mages.

Tinasha stepped to the very edge of the abyss and gazed up at Lucrezia. “But since this pillar is here…”

After discovering that the mirror was too sturdy to break, Tinasha had given up hope of resolving things that way. However, this pillar existed within a hole that extended beyond the mirror’s boundaries. When she considered that, Tinasha felt that destroying the artifact was possible.

“I’ll go back outside and try to break the mirror. She should be fine because of this pillar, but can you protect yourself, Senn?” Tinasha asked.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll also protect the remnants of the other human souls as best I can,” he replied.

“Thank you.” Tinasha smiled faintly, aware that he’d volunteered for that task because he knew his master very well.

Even if he did manage to protect the trapped souls from the aftermath of the mirror’s destruction and released them, their bodies were long gone. Like any other souls, the freed ones would dissolve slowly into the world.

Tinasha thought that better than being trapped in the looking glass like a specimen, however. Senn must have discerned that his master would feel that way.

The queen smiled at him. “She’s the one you said would understand me, right?”

“Yes…although she really is a troublemaker.”

“Once we’ve all made it out of here, introduce her to me,” Tinasha replied. She turned to set about her task but caught sight of something. Above, the girl within the pillar had opened her eyes.

Her face bore no expression, yet she stared at Tinasha with eyes of glittering gold.

“Ah…”

Instinctively, Tinasha took a step back. The girl reached out both arms to her. Her face emerged from the pillar as if she were rising from water. Red lips parted as a voice made all of the darkness tremble.

“I wish for the rejection of any outsiders watching. I wish for the refutation of any interference. I shall bestow a fitting transformation upon the one who can accomplish that.”

The pressure was crushing.

Tinasha’s very soul shook, like she was rupturing into pieces.

The voice seemed to come from the holes above and below the column. It could not have been a human sound.

If this girl was a witch, she was far too different from anyone else. This went beyond strength—she was simply unfathomable.

While Tinasha was still too stunned to speak, the girl lowered her eyelids. When she opened her eyes again, they were still locked on Tinasha.

There was emotion in that gaze now, where there hadn’t been before. It seemed closest to curiosity. The girl tilted her head inquisitively. “Why are you here? Did you break the barrier to come?”

“Yes…I did. I wanted Senn to tell me what was going on,” Tinasha replied.

At that, the girl looked to the spirit. Her amber eyes narrowed skeptically before she returned her gaze to Tinasha without saying anything to him. “Which means you’re the Queen of Tuldarr. You have so much magic that it really surprised me. I thought you were a new witch.”

“I’m just as surprised. What is that pillar that’s passing through planes of existence?”

“This? It’s connected to the world itself, making it ironclad as far as conceptual things go. All it can do is protect me, and I can’t use my own will to activate it. It’s strong, but not that easy to use.”

“How is such a thing even possible? I can’t figure it out at all. And what did you mean by what you said before? About wishing to reject outsiders watching.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?” The girl blinked, her tone so unconcerned that it was hard to believe she was lying.

Thinking back on it, Tinasha did sense that the booming call sounded more like something rising from the holes than like any sound this girl could have produced. If anything, she was probably just a mouthpiece.

Tinasha muttered, “So that means it came from another realm, and if I mess up, then the fabric of the world itself…”

“So? What do you think you’re doing breaking that barrier I worked so hard to put up?” demanded Lucrezia, bringing Tinasha back to herself.

Her train of thought had derailed, and she got herself back on track. “I want to destroy this mirror. You’re the Witch of the Forbidden Forest, aren’t you?”

“I am. My name’s Lucrezia, but I suppose you wouldn’t call me that anyway.”

“I will,” replied Tinasha, and the girl in the pillar widened her eyes.

A strained smile quickly spread across her face. “Well, if you think you can break the mirror, then be my guest. I’ve tried myself, and it was just too sturdy. I couldn’t do it, so I thought maybe it would be possible if I did it from the inside. And here we are.”

“So *that’s* how you got yourself sealed in here?” Senn piped up sourly.

“Hey, you’re trapped, too, so you have no room to talk,” Lucrezia shot back coldly.

Their exchange told Tinasha almost all she needed to know about their relationship, although this was hardly the time to consider such things. She pointed at the pillar that could break through realms. “Because this pillar is running through it, that means there are already cracks in the mirror, conceptually speaking. That means if we can make another hole from the outside, we may be able to break it.”

“Hmm. Normally, I’d say that’s not possible, but you might just pull it off,” mused Lucrezia.

“If the queen doesn’t break the mirror, the guy using your body is going to invade Tuldarr,” Senn informed her.

“The *what*? What in the world is going on?! How did this happen?” cried Lucrezia.

“A lot is happening… My fiancé is holding him at bay for now. When the mirror’s destroyed, can you regain control of your body?”

“Of course I can. It’s mine,” she replied without any hesitation. It was exactly what anyone would expect from a witch.

Tinasha nodded to Senn. “All right, I’m heading outside, then. Take care of things in here.”

Leaving things to these two would be fine, she thought.

Led by the thread of her consciousness, Tinasha moved up and out. Once she was free of the mirror, she began to pour all of her power into the artifact.

“Power must be defined. An ocean of life. A past melding of wills. A water spray will spiral down from the sky and plunge into the earth.”

She concentrated her magic while speaking a lengthy incantation. Every strand of every intricately woven spell configuration wound around the mirror and applied pressure to it. It was supposed to target the hole Lucrezia’s pillar had opened up. The mirror was already broken from the inside, giving Tinasha a means to destroy it now that she knew about that weakness.

“Six locked doors. A voice of premonition. My order shall come at the end of twilight.”

It was enough pressure to flatten a castle with ease. An ordinary magic implement would have shattered in an instant.

Yet the stubbornly resilient artifact displayed no signs of budging, while sweat beaded on Tinasha’s forehead. It reminded her of the pressure that bore down on her in those mysterious ruins. That place, too, must have been an outsiders’ artifact.

I’m in the opposite position than I was in then.

Her opponent was just as irregular, though. Tinasha gritted her teeth against the sensation of her power being drained. Her fingers touching the mirror turned discolored. Blood vessels burst, unable to endure the struggle between the looking glass and the magical power Tinasha was forcing into it.

Still, Tinasha did not retreat.

She had entrusted the battlefield to Oscar. He had believed she could do this, and she wouldn’t fail to live up to that confidence. His life and many others all rode on her actions at this moment.

Tinasha absolutely would not lose. More power flowed from her, and she planted her trembling legs firmly to keep steady.

The incantation had long since stopped as she focused all of her vast, pure magic onto one single point.

It wasn’t enough yet.

More. I want more power.

Suppressing the storm raging inside her, Tinasha pulled every bit of strength from it.

“I will…overcome! I believe…I will!”

One faint crack appeared on the mirror’s frame, which gradually widened.

Unfortunately, that was when Tinasha’s vision turned dark. She had lost too much blood to wield such immense might.

She couldn’t tell if she was standing anymore.

For a moment, her whole being and soul melted away.

Forcing all her remaining strength into her fingers, Tinasha struggled to stay conscious as she collapsed.

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Oscar was deftly fending off Hubert’s erratic barrages, albeit with some difficulty. Akashia could nullify any magic attacks, and any that slipped past wouldn’t pierce Tinasha’s barrier. While Hubert was desperately throwing all possible means of psychological magic at the other king, none of it was proving lethal. Still, it meant Oscar had lost all sense of time.

“I’m starting to get pretty annoyed.”

Oscar's mounting sense of irritation was considerable, yet Hubert had to be even more irritated. The man inside the witch's body hurled random spells down from the sky.

"You're just a brat who's nothing without his sword! Are you scared of a witch?" Hubert taunted.

"Like you've got any room to talk. And besides, witches are worth being scared of—*you're not*," Oscar said blandly, despite the provocation in what he was saying.

"Just try and say that again!" Hubert roared, losing his temper and preparing a gigantic spell. Before he could complete it, however, he paused. The expression froze on his face. "No… No, it can't be…"

Oscar frowned up at the half-formed spell that fizzled out. Hubert was writhing in midair, scrabbling and tearing at the witch's scalp with both hands.

A maelstrom of magic swirled around the witch, creating powerful gusts.

"No… No, no, no…"

Hubert's pleas floated down on gales from above, but there was no one who could grant his request.

Instead, a devastating force emerged—a formidable wave of magical power that swept across the entire plain.

The wind died, and in the moonlight stood a woman—a witch wearing a beautiful smile.

"Oh, it's been so very long since I was last outside." She stretched her arms above her head. When she glanced down to the ground and caught sight of Oscar, she gave a little smirk and slowly descended to him.

"Good evening. Are you her fiancé? I suppose I owe you my gratitude. I haven't been in my body for such a long time. Thank you," she said to him, though Oscar remained on guard. The feel of the magic entwined around her body was entirely different from how it had been moments earlier. She inspired in people the same uneasy sensation as that of standing at the edge of an endlessly deep forest.

Tightening his grip on Akashia, Oscar asked, "Are you Lucrezia?"

"I am. Oh, are you the Akashia swordsman? And yet you have so much magic… But I don't suppose you're a mage."

"Yes, I'm the Akashia swordsman. I have magic because I'm Lavinia's grandson," Oscar explained.

"What?! Lavinia's a grandma?! And to the king of Farsas? That's crazy!"

"Unfortunately, it's true," Oscar assured her, feeling like he was speaking with any ordinary woman, save for the fact that she knew Lavinia, so she had to be a witch. She exuded no hostility, and though Oscar remained cautious, he allowed himself a small degree of relief.

Lucrezia inspected the wounds all over her body and pursed her lips. "Ugh, he couldn't even heal? How careless…"

As she spoke, her wounds disappeared, and a satisfied smile spread across her face. Unable to hold back any longer, Oscar finally voiced his true concern. “How’s Tinasha?”

“Oh, that girl? Senn was watching her. She’ll likely be back before long.”

“I see…”

That probably meant she was safe.

Lucrezia grinned in amusement at how visibly relieved he looked. “You two are so funny. You’re engaged, right? When’s the wedding?”

“Next week.”

“Next week?! Is Lavinia coming? Can I come, too?”

“Lavinia isn’t coming. I don’t mind if you attend, but you can’t cause any trouble.”

“Oh, what? I wouldn’t do that! I’d be glad just to watch,” she insisted with a friendly smile, though her eyes were dancing in clear delight.

A real witch truly was inscrutable. Oscar had the feeling he’d made a troublesome acquaintance.

Lucrezia’s amber eyes caught the moonlight, glittering gold as she narrowed them at him. “So you two are to be married. With that much power between you, you could probably change the world.”

“I’m not trying to change the world. You witches don’t get publicly involved in anything, do you?”

“That stuff’s no fun anyway. I’m more concerned about my long-neglected herb garden at home. How do you think it’s doing?”

“Probably all withered away? How many centuries ago are we talking?” Oscar questioned, accustomed to speaking with people out of time, thanks to Tinasha.

At that, Lucrezia let out a huge sigh and slumped over.

Somewhat less enthusiastically than before, she said, “I suppose that’s to be expected. Times have really changed while I was away. Well, I have business to take care of, so I’ll be off. We’ll meet again if fate wills it.”

She gave a little wave, her amber eyes glinting. In a flash, she had faded into the night and was gone.

Lucrezia’s abrupt departure marked the end of the one-night war.

After making sure that the witch had truly left, Oscar used a spirit to contact Legis. From his position in the castle, Legis immediately ordered the troops to return and began the process of sending back the Magdalsian soldiers. There were a host of other little tasks to handle as well, which he would surely carry out smoothly.

Soon after, Mila came to Oscar and whispered to him that Tinasha was back at the castle. With his role complete, Oscar sheathed Akashia and peered into the night. A bright azure moon glowed in the utterly cloudless, starry sky. Its cool and clear brilliance reminded him of his beloved fiancée somehow.

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Overnight, word of Magdalsia's invasion of Tuldarr spread across the mainland. While some criticized Tuldarr for being too naive, as it had only neutralized the enemy soldiers without wounding many of them, more people were simply frightened by the strange and devastating power behind such a feat. As Tinasha had planned, the Magic Empire's name now inspired even greater reverence and fear.

While the public story was that King Hubert of Magdalsia had died in battle, the truth was that he was murdered in his bedchamber. Both Magdalsia and Tuldarr kept silent about the fact that a witch and her power had sealed the king's fate, however.

Magdalsia imposed a gag order on any talk of the inexplicable and sudden troop deployment, as well as its ruler's demise.

Two days later, the childless King Hubert's very young nephew took the throne, as if nothing of consequence had occurred.

"So Lucrezia really did kill Hubert?"

"Probably… I mean, it wouldn't surprise me."

Two rulers were having tea in a salon in Tuldarr Castle. One was the master of the castle—the sovereign queen—and the other was the man who would be her husband.

Tinasha blew on her steaming tea and sighed. "Sixty years ago, Lucrezia went inside that mirror to destroy it. And upon realizing she couldn't, she sealed it away instead… Her body was maintained by a spell, like a magic sleep. She cast a barrier over a cave close to Magdalsia Castle and laid herself and the mirror to rest there. Checking against what you were told, we can extrapolate that Valt broke that barrier and gave the mirror to Hubert."

"Yet another annoying mess. Still, I'm sure it's better for that witch to be free than to stay asleep in a cave," Oscar commented. It was hard to call this a win, as it had brought calamity upon Hubert and Magdalsia, but it had freed Lucrezia from an otherwise endless sleep. Hubert's tale marked yet another case in history of a king's corruption bringing ruin to his country.

Tinasha set down her cup. "Hubert's soul must have been drawn to the witch's body because of its power. Lucrezia was so upset about her body being taken."

"Naturally. So how did that spirit of yours end up trapped with her?"

"When the seal was broken, a wave of her magic leaked out. He found that strange and went to inspect it, only to slip through the barrier she had cast and end up stuck in the mirror along with her. She was really upset about that."

"Gotcha. Well, it turned out all right for you," Oscar said, which made Tinasha give him a quizzical look.

He smiled calmly at her. "She's someone important to one of your spirits, so you hesitated a little over whether to kill her, didn't you?"

“Mrr…” Tinasha only mumbled. Oscar had guessed it in one try, and she didn’t know how to respond.

But in truth, anyone would feel that way.

Tinasha didn’t want to kill anyone unless it was necessary, a desire that was strong in her *because* she had taken so many lives. She had remained in the castle during the war with Tayiri four hundred years ago not only to keep the Traditionalists in check but also because she’d been conflicted over wielding her devastating power to force people to yield.

Did using cunning and wit to kill have any place in a battle between armies?

It shouldn’t have, in theory, but Tinasha wondered if perhaps it did. In fact, she hoped that was the case. She had reviewed what seemed right on numerous occasions, though had been careful to conceal her doubts during the Dark Age.

She kept eliminating any who sought to replace her by force so that they would never catch a shred of weakness in her. And she ruled for five years on a throne washed in blood.

“I’m a little tired,” Tinasha admitted.

“That’s because you’re too stubborn about acting on your own. Rely on others more. Things have changed in the past four centuries,” Oscar chided bluntly.”

“Thank… Thank you.”

“And don’t you dare call off our wedding. Do you hate me or something?”

“I—I never said anything about that!”

“You didn’t have to. I could tell you were thinking it! I can’t believe how little you trusted me!”

“I just didn’t want to make trouble for you,” Tinasha mumbled, jerking her head aside abashedly.

That left her cheek wide open for Oscar to reach out and pinch it. She cried, “Ow, ow, ow!” and flailed around.

“Even if marrying me proves to be an obstacle, you can just use your power as the Akashia swordsman to subdue me… Confine me to some wing of the castle, and we can still be married that way, and it’ll be the same…”

“How will it be the same?! Reexamine the way your mind works,” he retorted.

“It happened somewhat often in the Dark Age. Any given castle would have one to two members of a foreign royal family locked up.”

“How many times do I have to say that things have changed before you get it through your head? Your sensibilities need to be rebuilt from the ground up.”

“You mean you want to call off our engagement?”

“No!”

Oscar’s involvement in the recent battle was kept under wraps, even within Farsas Castle. There was no way to publicize that fact if no one was even supposed to know that a witch had led the Magdalsian troops. His

inner circle of advisers had looked like they wanted to say something, but in the end, only Lazar dressed Oscar down.

“It was an emergency, but…you must not act so rashly in the future.”

That said, there were very few people capable of battling a witch.

Tinasha cast her eyes up to the ceiling. “Anyway, what was Valt thinking? The king of Magdalsia going into a coma wouldn’t inconvenience me that much, so it couldn’t have been a diversion.”

“Maybe he wanted you to touch an outsiders’ artifact.”

“What? So it could absorb my soul? But unlike regular humans, I can resist its influence. I wouldn’t have been sealed inside unless I chose to enter, like Lucrezia did.”

“I don’t know the details. It just feels like he’s feeding us little bits of info and seeing what we’ll do.”

“Feeding us info? What else did he say?”

“Noth… Nothing,” Oscar replied, unusually evasive.

Tinasha frowned at him. “What is it? Did he tell you something?”

“Nope, nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“If you say so, then all right. Oh, can I ask you something?”

“Sure. What?”

“Did you know Lucrezia before?”

The Oscar that saved Tinasha four hundred years ago had said, “If I mess up and go too far back in time, I’ll go and see Lucrezia instead, I guess.”

Only a witch could survive over centuries. Therefore, the previous Oscar had known Lucrezia.

The current Oscar only stared at Tinasha, however. “Use your head, silly. That doesn’t add up. She got herself sealed away before I was born.”

“Oh… You’re right. Never mind,” Tinasha replied, dismissing the topic with a wave of her hand.

Vast swaths of history were changing little by little. That discrepancy may or may not have been part of those changes. All Tinasha had was the present, though. She smiled, savoring her happiness.

Oscar gazed intently at this young queen who would soon abdicate. He suddenly recalled the look of sheer relief on her face the very first time they met; there had been tears in her eyes.

Nearly a year had passed since then. Curiously, the time had passed quickly, while it also felt like they had come a very long way. Oscar closed his eyes, reflecting upon their journey. “I’ve suffered some real trials and tribulations, in my own way.”

“Where’s that coming from? I don’t disagree, but…”

“There’s no one else for me.”

“I certainly hope there isn’t, considering our wedding is around the corner… Why are you talking about this now? If you’re having doubts, should we just start over from the beginning?”

“Seriously, stop with that.”

Even if Oscar did have other wives in different timelines, he'd chosen Tinasha in this one. He wanted to spend his life with her and make her smile until the day they both passed into the annals of history. He was here because he wanted to give her that; there was no other option for him.

Oscar beckoned her closer like he was calling a cat over. "C'mere."

In a catlike reply, Tinasha cocked her head to one side before floating up into the air and settling back down on his lap. Oscar caught up a lock of her glossy hair. "Don't get too much in your own head and overthink everything. I can handle your baggage. That's why I'm marrying you."

"But I'm clingy and don't know how to act in this time period."

"I know. It's what makes you who you are," he replied, pressing a kiss to her long black hair. Tinasha blushed and threw her arms around Oscar's neck.

He patted her on the back. "I'm the one who summoned you here, and I promise I'll make you happy."

"Oscar…"

He thought he heard traces of shock in her voice.

Tinasha let him go and pulled back to gaze at his face. Tears had filled her dark eyes. "I'm already so happy. You really did keep the promise you made to me when I was a girl."

When she was thirteen years old, he had come to her rescue. That memory had helped her through becoming queen and sitting upon a throne of ice.

Living his life with her meant knowing and accepting the kind of queen she was.

Oscar gave his beautiful fiancée a kiss. "If you ever consider doing anything reckless again, tell me first. Depending on what it is, I'll knock some sense into you."

"I look forward to that," Tinasha answered with a delighted, satisfied grin.

The smile belonged to the girl she was and the queen she had become.

5. Once upon a Time, with You

He had a dream of a very long time ago.

Screams echoed from the hallway.

That was highly abnormal, considering this was Farsas Castle, capital of one of the Great Nations.

He blinked his eyes open from his nap in the lounge during a break in his hectic schedule.

Intermittent screams filtered in from the hallway. He leaped up and ran out to discover something with wings chasing around a host of ladies-in-waiting.

He zeroed in on the flying thing. “Nark?”

It was certainly shaped like the king’s dragon, though the coloring was entirely different. Its body, large as a hawk’s, was gray as stone. While he had no idea what it was, he cast a spell to bring down the creature as it flew overhead.

However, it sensed the magic, quivering in midair before reversing course and flying away.

“Hey! Stop!”

Whatever it was, he couldn’t let it escape. He swiftly cast another spell and released it. This magic would paralyze the flying thing for just a second and slow its movements. The bird stiffened when the spell hit, but it did not fall. It zoomed away on unsteady wings.

Then a white light from out of nowhere engulfed the gray bird. The radiance formed a cocoon, holding it frozen in midair. Realizing who had sent out the capturing spell, he said, “Queen Tinasha.”

“I finally caught it… That thing was flying all over the place,” Tinasha grumbled. She made sure none of the ladies-in-waiting were injured, then reached for the luminous cocoon. It dropped harmlessly into her arms.

Curious about the mysterious flying object, he asked, “What is that?”

“Something Oscar brought back from some spirit sorcerer ruins he explored. He said it was a stone egg, but at some point, it must have hatched.”

Tinasha cradled it in her arms. “Oh, and thank you for your quick thinking back there.”

“I didn’t…”

“I saw you. I’m very impressed but not at all surprised that you switched to the optimal spell to use right away.”

“I…thank you, Your Majesty.”

She was undoubtedly referring to how he’d pivoted immediately from an attack spell to a stun spell.

Tinasha flashed him a mischievous grin. “I suppose it’s all in a day’s work for you, Valt. Or should I call you the new royal chief mage?”

“Your Majesty…”

The young man, who had only become royal chief mage the month before, threw his queen a mildly dismayed look.

Tinasha, witch and queen, giggled in response.

In the court of Farsas, mages valued talent over all else. That did not mean a person’s character had no bearing; it meant an individual’s bloodline and family were irrelevant. That was why Valt, who had become a court mage three years earlier, was chosen as the new royal chief mage after his predecessor stepped down.

Of course, he also had the support of Tinasha, the queen. She held the cleverness of Valt’s magic and his keen powers of judgment in high regard. In a sense, he was certified by a witch.

And said witch was currently furious with her husband. “Unbelievable! Not only did you sneak out to explore some old wreck, but you also brought back something fishy! Don’t you know that spirit sorcerer ruins are full of hazardous objects?!”

“I know, I know,” Oscar replied from behind his study desk.

“No, you don’t, or you’d have a better answer!” she snapped, making the king grin. Valt, who was there for tea with them, was careful not to say a word. On the table in front of him sat a small white cocoon.

“Ridiculous… And this stone bird hasn’t been identified at all, though it seems to be a moving statue of some kind.”

“Oh, so like the ones in your tower? Those are fun. Should we place it here in the castle?” Oscar suggested.

“You’d just fight it and destroy it. Absolutely not.”

“Do they repair themselves? Every time I go, I find them intact again.”

“I’m the one who repairs them!” Tinasha exclaimed.

He was clearly riling up his wife on purpose. It was probably best to let this play out, although that meant none of them would ever get back to work.

Valt was left with no choice but to cut in, keeping his voice as calm as possible. “Based on the shape and the fact that it flies, I’d say it might have been used for patrolling.”

Thinking the stone bird’s egg to be a “funny-shaped rock,” Oscar had brought it back and then hidden it in the magic potions storehouse. At some

point, it had hatched and started flying around the castle. By the time Valt noticed the fuss, the entire palace was in an uproar.

Tinasha floated up into the air and crossed her legs. “While that does seem very likely, the spell it’s enchanted with has a strange feel. I’m going to analyze it.”

“A strange spell? Then while you’re doing that, Queen Tinasha, I shall research these ruins,” Valt put in.

“Sorry to trouble you. Please do,” Oscar added.

The fifth king of Farsas had apparently mentioned these ruins in his journal. Valt read through the notes, but he found that the writings only described the general location of the site and did not reveal any information of significance about the ruins. Tinasha hadn’t known about them at all. The only thing she could tell from the stone bird’s spell was that it was likely the work of a spirit sorcerer.

The only thing left to do was to find out what the ruins were by cross-referencing history books. Hopefully, that might reveal the stone bird’s intended use.

Valt got to his feet, documents in hand. As he was about to leave, Oscar called, “Valt, do you know how things are going with the eastern towns?”

“Ah…that situation.”

Recently, there had been a rash of unexpected deaths and suicides in various towns and villages in eastern Farsas. While Valt wasn’t in charge of the investigation, as the royal chief mage, he was aware of its progress.

“To be perfectly honest, it’s not going well. So many people have died, yet we can’t find any commonalities between their deaths… Some perish out of nowhere, screaming and vomiting blood, while others are discovered with their heads stuck in water jars. A few use magic to attack those around them before dying. Nothing is consistent, and the victims expire quickly. Some manage to survive, but most of those have gone insane, and the rest are in comas.”

“So bizarre. Tinasha, what do you think?”

“Mmm, it’s a mystery to me,” Tinasha replied. “The people in comas are on life-support treatment, but their souls are unstable.”

Valt’s eyebrows twitched upward at that, but Tinasha did not notice and went on. “I suspected demons were involved, but no witnesses mentioned anything to that effect, and there have been no signs of them, either. There’s also the fact that a significant percentage of the dead were mages. Sometimes it was a case of magic going haywire, but postmortem examinations can’t tell us exactly why or how that happened. Some of those people didn’t have enough power to actually draw upon and had only received training in how to control it.”

“I guess we’ll just have to keep looking into it. I’d like to get to the bottom of this quickly,” said Oscar.

“I will do everything in my power,” Valt said with a bow before he left the study.

As he walked down the corridor, he fell into thought.

There's so much I don't know… What's influencing this?

He couldn't have said which lifetime he was on.

However, this was his first time serving the court of Farsas, home to the Witch of the Azure Moon, the most powerful mage in all the land. He did not yet know where the red orb of Eleterria was, but the blue one was in the Tuldarr treasure vault. Valt wanted to gain her trust, but failing that, he hoped to learn about her adopted home of Farsas and the…temperament of the king.

Valt had freely used what he knew to get himself to the position he held. After coming to the court, he had used his existing knowledge to help him resolve numerous situations, including the resurrection of a demonic beast by a Former Druza faction, the rise of Lanak—a survivor of Tuldarr—and the battle with the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned in the neighboring country of Yarda. Tinasha, in particular, had a tendency to rush off on her own if left unattended. It was quite a challenge to hold her in check and take the actions she wanted to take herself.

However, Valt had learned that there were multiple events he was entirely unaware of. He thought he had a grasp on the principal sequence, but Oscar bringing back a mysterious egg from the ruins and the rash of suspicious deaths in Farsas were entirely unfamiliar. He'd wondered if it was all a ripple effect from his becoming a court mage, but the changes were far too substantial for that. The month prior, the horse-rider tribe known as the Ito went on a widespread pillaging and looting spree. They took the fortress of Minnedart as their base, only to be defeated there. This was another thing Valt had no memory of ever experiencing before. He needed to record it for the records.

"The records, huh?" he muttered self-deprecatingly.

What good would that do? He was the only one who could read them.

Ultimately, would there be any point to writing down what he knew for her?

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"I really can't take my eyes off you for one second," the witch grumbled as she brewed tea. Oscar burst out laughing.

Lazar walked in with a stack of documents and let out a heavy sigh. "If you want to go exploring in the ruins, Your Majesty, please tell Queen Tinasha… It will really save me some stress, as I get mixed up in it every time."

"But if I tell her, she'll stop me," Oscar responded shamelessly, right in front of her.

The witch arched one eyebrow. "Of course I will. This time you even got Doan to go with you…"

“Yeah, because I needed a mage for some of it, and the other ones would’ve gone tattling to you right away.”

“You seem to have a very good command of your subjects’ personalities! But I still grilled Doan to near death!”

Tinasha was the greatest mage in the castle. Her judgment on magic-related matters was generally more accurate than the king’s, which the court mages all knew. Whenever something happened, most of them would go to her to report it.

However, there were those mages who tended to be more flexible. One of these was Doan, who often found himself at the mercy of the king’s whims.

Oscar picked up his teacup. “And because you chewed him out, Doan’s begging me to let him transfer to a research-only position.”

“Yes, and that’s your fault! Yours, not mine!”

“But I can’t give him up. Renart reports directly to you, while Valt can be too unreadable.”

Tinasha flashed a strained smile, floating up into the air and settling on the arm of Oscar’s chair. Leaning back against him, she rubbed her head along his cheek. Hugging her knees to her chest, she said, “That’s because Valt doesn’t like to let his emotions show. He wants to get along just by being friendly on the outside. Doan is much cleverer in that regard. He knows that we’re less likely to suspect him of anything if he’s shown us some of his genuine self. However, that also means he winds up as your accomplice far too often.”

Tinasha grinned, her eyes lighting up. “But when it comes to that girl he lives with, Valt shows a much more human side, and it’s very interesting. I met her once when she came to the castle to bring him lunch. I can tell he cares for her a lot.”

“I know the fact that he’s unreadable doesn’t mean he carries bad intentions. He’s like you—he thinks everything through on his own and then handles it alone. You both conduct yourselves well, but you’re too careful when it counts, because you never give anything away, and that’s your downfall.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about your solo missions and how they need to stop. Admittedly, I’ll still be entrusting anything magic related to you. Just tell me if you run into trouble.”

“Okay,” Tinasha sang, sliding off the armrest and onto her feet.

Oscar picked up the cocoon on the table. Before his wife could leave to go work on her analysis, he called, “Wait, Tinasha. Demons can’t get past the castle city wards, right?”

“Right. The wards are designed that way. We’d definitely have a hard time fighting off a high-ranking demon.”

“Can you cast similar ones around the other eastern towns and villages, then?”

“I could…but I couldn’t get to all of them right away.”

The castle city’s defensive wards represented the highest level of security possible for continuously running ground-level wards. Tinasha would need to get things in order to establish them around multiple communities, and the process would take considerable time. If Tinasha set aside all her other duties, she would still only be able to cover three a day.

Oscar nodded. That answer seemed to line up with what he had expected. “Just do what you can. It’s only to be safe, but I’d appreciate it. Start with the towns closest to the ones where the unnatural deaths occurred and then go west from there.”

“But Oscar, that means—”

Tinasha cut herself off, gasping as she realized what Oscar was implying. She thought back over the details of the previous cases.

The unexplained deaths had broken out in multiple towns in eastern Farsas. The easternmost settlements had been beset by this issue the earliest.

Thus, the king suspected that whatever was responsible was approaching the castle city from the east.

Oscar caught Lazar’s eye, then Tinasha’s, and he scratched at his temple. “Five days before the first of these deaths, a mage fell from Minnedart’s ramparts and died. No one witnessed it, so everyone assumed it was an accident, but there were reports of strange-sounding screams. If it’s related to all the other deaths, it means something’s coming toward us from beyond the eastern border. I’d rather read too much into things and be safe instead of sorry.”

“I’ll…have it done immediately,” Tinasha said before leaving the study.

After Lazar watched the queen go, he asked the king in a tremulous tone, “Do you think it’s a demon?”

“Who knows? If so, it’s an awfully slow-moving demon. It’s going to take another two weeks to reach the city,” Oscar replied, resting his chin on his hands and letting his gaze wander.

As he watched his king sink deep into thought, Lazar felt a jolt of inexplicable fear.

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The castle archives held no record of the ruins in question.

“I thought that might be the case,” Valt muttered as he left the castle to head home one evening.

Because there was no record of the site, people had always thought the formation north of Farsas to be merely a natural cavern. However, there was an ancient structure concealed deep within the hollow. The past king of Farsas, who’d written of it in his journal, only noted he’d heard of the location from a spirit sorcerer who became his adviser. He had reigned centuries ago, a short time before Tinasha’s birth. Many records from that

era had been lost to time, especially those pertaining to the secretive spirit sorcerers.

“All I can do now is consult my ancestors’ accounts…”

The archives Valt had inherited as the Time-Reader heir were vast. When he first gained access, he skimmed through all of them, but he had yet to read them carefully. The other heirs were probably much the same.

Therefore, there was a very good chance that some record or another Valt wasn’t familiar with *did* describe the ruins.

With those thoughts on his mind, he reached his home, which was tucked into a corner of the castle city. The delicious aroma of soup wafted from the house.

“I’m back,” he called as he opened the door.

“Valt!” cried a girl as she leaped at him head-on.

“Oof!” Valt staggered back from her unexpected crash landing. “What’s the matter, Miralys?”

“Open this,” the silver-haired girl instructed, handing him a new spice jar. She must have bought it and then discovered she wasn’t strong enough to wrest the lid off. While she could have gone back to the store or asked a neighbor for help, Miralys wasn’t very interested in interacting with anyone besides Valt.

That was probably because she was an orphan who’d endured a rough childhood, betrayal by her fellow bandits, and being left to die in the woods…

No, that’s not right.

That was who Miralys was when he met her for the very first time, the girl who later became his wife.

That wasn’t who *this* was. Valt had spared no effort searching for Miralys and had managed to grab her before she joined the bandits. She wasn’t the person he’d found bleeding in a forest.

But even so…

“Valt? Can’t you open it?”

“No, I can. I was just lost in thought.”

“Lost in thought about opening a jar? Were you thinking of a spell to get the lid off it, since you can’t do it on your own?”

“I told you, I can,” Valt said, doing just that and passing the jar back to Miralys.

“Thanks.” Miralys accepted the container and scurried off for the kitchen. While she hadn’t shown much emotion, he could tell she was in a good mood. As he listened to her start humming, he smiled and went to his room to change clothes.

Valt didn’t have a detailed plan when it came to working in Farsas Castle. He was simply there to observe the palace and those inside.

It came as no surprise to discover that Farsas was incredibly stable. It placed great emphasis on magic research, and the court mages were well treated. He could easily live on his own with Miralys. After working for

another three years or so as royal chief mage, he could even retire and go live a reclusive life with her in some rural town.

But, no, he couldn't. He didn't have what he truly needed.

No matter how content Valt was with his present life, he couldn't grow too complacent.

"Valt, dinner's ready."

"Coming," he replied, dropping the journal he was about to read back onto the pile of them in his room. When he reached the dinner table, Miralys looked up from setting dishes out and gave him the littlest smile.

It was infectious, and he returned the expression. They sat at the little dining table facing each other.

Miralys spread homemade jam on some soft bread. "You worked a little late today."

"There's something I need to look into. I'm going to be doing some reading after dinner, too, but call for me if you need anything."

"I'll bring you some tea, then. Did anything interesting happen today?"

"I was working, not having fun, but in fact, something interesting *did* happen. But it was nothing too unusual. The king brought back an egg, which hatched into a stone bird that started flying all around the castle."

"I never know what you're talking about. How could something made of stone fly?"

"In the Dark Age, they researched this sort of thing—artificial creatures. Actually, creating them proved difficult, so the research was abandoned. This is the first time I've seen one made with spiritual magic. Queen Tinasha is going to analyze it, and let me look at a diagram of the spell configuration once it's done."

He knew that his spell-casting abilities were several grades higher than an ordinary person's, which was only natural because he'd spent more years living in the world *and* had his ancestors' journals.

Valt's genuine curiosity must have been evident, because Miralys narrowed her eyes. "You really love magic."

"Well…I'm a mage."

"I wish I'd been born with magic, too."

"I've lent you some of mine, haven't I?"

"That's just a mark. It's not enough to use magic."

Miralys had no magical power of her own. This left her unable to protect herself, so Valt had loaned her a portion of his energy. It was tied to her soul and would guard her.

Valt found the sight of Miralys puffing out her cheeks in displeasure very precious, but her impractical wish made his heart ache nonetheless. He'd wished the same thing himself once.

Valt hadn't been able to cast spells until the death of his father. There was no need yet to tell Miralys about that or any of the other secrets of his life. In her mind, she had simply met Valt by chance and was living with him.

Someday, he would reveal the truth to this Miralys. He would explain about himself, about her, about their past that had once existed, and about what was to come.

That day was a ways off yet, though. They were enjoying shockingly peaceful days, because Valt wasn't on the hunt for Eleterria this time.

Valt suddenly recalled something. "Lately, people have been dying in strange ways over in the east. Queen Tinasha said that because we're affected, the culprit could be a demon. The wards around the city prevent demons from entering, but still…be very careful."

"Okay. But I don't go outside the city anyway. I have no reason to."

"I'm only saying it just in case," Valt said, narrowing his eyes at Miralys. When he concentrated, he could sense the faintest pulse of her soul—a living being's core. It was the primordial power that all possessed, born of nature and returned to nature.

Each time he saw that light inside her, he felt spurred to keep going.

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The next day, when Valt arrived at work, he found a palm-sized stone bird flying around the castle courtyard.

His fellow court mages were gazing up at it in wonderment. Doan noticed him and waved. "There you are. Look, it's so funny."

"It's gotten smaller."

"Queen Tinasha analyzed it and made a duplicate. It sounds like it really was used for patrolling, although we don't know what it was watching for. It doesn't seem like it was only for people and demons, however."

"Not people and demons? Then what?"

That left only low-ranking demons and fairies. Valt wanted to ask the duplicate maker herself, but Tinasha wasn't around. "Where's the queen?"

"She went with Renart to set wards around the eastern towns, as the king requested."

Which meant the king suspected demonic involvement in the rash of mysterious deaths.

Having served Oscar for the past three years, Valt judged him capable of jumping from the tiniest clue to the right answer. He would say things like, "I just had a hunch." Tinasha claimed that her husband had very good intuition, but it was probably due to a calculation that the man wasn't consciously aware of. Oscar was also quick to make decisions and often worked several steps ahead of regular people. Warding the settlements must have meant he'd detected something.

Doan shrugged. "The idea of it gives me the creeps, but she's doing it to be safe. Anyway, that means you can bring the report you've been working on to the king."

"How do you know I have a report?" Valt questioned

"Because you're late today. You were up late, weren't you?"

Doan had hit the nail on the head. Valt gazed up at the sky beseechingly. Sylvia and Pamyra snickered. Valt outranked all of them in the mage hierarchy, but they were all around the same age and had come to the court at roughly the same time. After working together for years, they'd all grown close.

Valt held both his hands up in surrender. "All right, all right. I'm going to go see His Majesty, then. Let me know if anything happens."

"You got it."

As Valt left, Doan idly remarked, "Oh, and this bird has a function to scatter something, but the first bird was empty inside."

"Scatter…what?"

His first thought was poison. The original had only been empty because it was newly hatched. However, that didn't match what Valt had uncovered. While thinking it over, he blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "Didn't that make Queen Tinasha even unhappier with the king?"

"That's right. So before she gets back, please try and convince the king to be less reckless."

"I'll try," Valt agreed, but between the king and queen, he had a much harder time with the former. In the past, Tinasha had killed him many more times than Oscar had, but he could still predict her thoughts and actions. The king of Farsas was far younger than the witch and often behaved erratically. Valt had taken a court position to better understand him, but even after three years in the castle, he still found the king difficult to deal with.

Valt knocked on the door to the study. Oscar called for him to enter, and when he did, the king flashed him a somewhat childlike grin. "You're back. So what were the ruins made for?"

"They were once a hidden refuge for spirit sorcerers who fled from mage hunters," Valt replied. That was what he had managed to dig out from the vast records kept by his ancestors.

He passed a copy he had made of the journal to the king. "They were built by people who were driven out by a country that predated Tayiri, but according to records made by someone who knew that era well, they were only used for about thirty years. After that, the residents started to die out, and those who were left scattered all over."

"Ah yeah, since the ruins are in the north, it would make sense for them to be related to Tayiri," remarked the king.

"With so many spirit sorcerers, they could have fought, but they elected to go into hiding. That may be because spirit sorcerers lose their power once their chastity is gone."

"A while back, Tinasha took me to some seaside ruins. That place had a real mysterious feel. I can't speak for Tinasha, but to me, it was like it had accepted this sense of very gradual demise. I also didn't pick up on any sort of hostility from the site where I retrieved the egg."

Spirit sorcerers were proficient in controlling nature, and some preferred to live in the wild and pass away there. Oscar never mentioned as much to his wife, since she was a spirit sorcerer who had chosen to keep a long life. Valt didn't think she would mind, but perhaps the king was trying to be considerate.

"Why *did* you take that egg?" Valt inquired.

Oscar had gone to the ruins as a sort of test of skill. But as there were few traps and obstructions, he must have felt disappointed. Why bother returning with a relic, then? He wasn't the sort to dig up precious weapons or magic implements and haul them home.

In reply, Oscar flashed a strained smile. "The egg was placed on a small altar in the center of the ruins. The moment I saw it, I could tell it had been held in high regard. I hated the idea of it rotting away in there, forgotten."

"Next time, I recommend you tell the queen about this sort of thing right away without trying to hide it from her."

"I'll do that."

"If she gets back and she's still testy with you, tell her Valt has a report for her. I'll mediate things."

"Thanks. Sorry about this."

For now, the matter of the egg was closed.

Valt bowed and made ready to leave. When he lifted his head, he found the king staring straight at him. "Is…something the matter?"

"It's nothing. But if you ever run into trouble, tell me before deciding things on your own. I'll do what I can to help."

For a moment, it seemed that Oscar could see right through Valt's situation. Hearing a statement like that from the king was a surprise. Fortunately, he narrowly managed to keep his discomfiture from showing on his face, pasting on a pained grin. "Where could this be coming from? I don't have any complaints about my tenure here."

"Ah, it's just that I get this sense that you're the type who doesn't rely too much on others. But if you ever reach a fork in the road and you're not sure whether you're going to betray me or not, tell me first."

"I…don't know why such a thing would ever come to pass."

Cold sweat trickled down Valt's back.

Oscar couldn't have suspected anything, because Valt had no plots at the moment. At present, he only intended to serve Farsas.

However, this was Oscar looking at Valt, jumping a step ahead, and arriving at the correct answer. Valt bowed his head again. "I'm grateful to you for saying so. I dearly hope something like that never happens, but… should the worst occur, I will do as you ask."

"Mm-hmm. Talk to me anytime. That's what I'm here for," Oscar replied nonchalantly, despite being the ruler of an entire nation. While Oscar's behavior as king might have appeared unprecedented to those outside Farsas, he actually took the job extremely seriously and handled his responsibilities almost entirely on his own. Working for him drove that fact

home. His occasional escapes outside the castle and the attention he paid to his queen were, in his eyes, his allotted private time. In all other respects, he was a devoted servant of the people.

For a moment, Valt thought that Oscar's lifestyle was entirely unsustainable. Ultimately, he said nothing more and departed the study.

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The days that followed appeared to be very peaceful from an outside perspective.

Those were happy days, Valt thought. At the very least, he was able to live a calm, worry-free life with Miralys. He was struck with how big of a difference the choice of *how* to live made in his everyday life. The fact that he could even think that was proof he had wallowed in that time like pleasantly warm water.

They never found out what exactly the stone bird from the ruins scattered originally, but it didn't do any harm, so the matter was considered resolved. Tinasha placed a seal on the original bird Oscar brought back, but the small copy she had constructed became oddly popular among the court, and she ended up making five to fly around the castle.

Once Tinasha set up the wards around the towns, the mysterious deaths stopped. However, the protective spells around one small town vanished for reasons unknown.

Taking this very seriously, Tinasha went to investigate. Valt also spoke with the village's denizens, who all offered the same story. They'd seen several unfamiliar men with a sick-looking girl in tow. Nothing else unusual had transpired, however, and repairing the wards brought an end to the issue. Things continued without incident afterward.

On a very sunny day, Valt stepped from a covered outdoor walkway and headed for the training grounds. There he found the king and queen sparring.

The sound of metal clashing was inescapable. Tinasha slashed at Oscar with her sword, sweat dappling her lithe physique. Oscar parried it away effortlessly.

"Don't slow down just because you're tired. You have to keep your pace," the king instructed.

"I'm trying," she panted back, jabbing at her husband. He batted the attack away easily, causing her to stumble.

"Watch out!" he cried, grabbing her arm as she almost fell. Drawing her close, he patted her back. "Let's call it a day here. You look like you're going to keel over if we continue."

"I really lack endurance… Thank you," said the queen, perspiring all over. Her shoulders were heaving as she leaned against her husband's chest.

It was Oscar who noticed Valt first. “What is it? Which one of us do you need?”

“Queen Tinasha. A merchant party accompanied by a demonic beast familiar has arrived at the city gates and wishes to enter.”

Unauthorized demons and demonic spirits were not permitted in the castle city. Extenuating circumstances required permission from Tinasha or those sanctioned by her. It was a necessary measure to keep the city safe.

Tinasha brushed her sweaty bangs up and out of her face. “I didn’t receive an application mentioning anything like that.”

“Evidently, there was something wrong with their papers, and they were delayed in reaching the castle.”

Entry procedure called for applying to a mage authorized by Tinasha in advance of the desired day. However, the forms hadn’t made it in time on this occasion. Such groups could be kept waiting outside the city gates, but Tinasha was such a conscientious person that she frequently saw to these matters herself.

“Ooh, I see. It sounds like you’ve been very busy today, Valt. Just give me a moment,” Tinasha said.

“There’s no need. If you’ll authorize me, I can go,” Valt offered. His schedule was packed, but there was enough flexibility in it for him to go and do that.

Oscar patted Tinasha on the head. “Let Valt do it. You’re so worn out that it’ll take a while for you to look presentable.”

“Fine… Please see to it.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Tinasha pointed at Valt, and a tiny dot of white light appeared at her fingertip and floated over to him, where it was absorbed into his forehead. Now he was fully authorized. A little stone bird popped out of nowhere and settled itself on Valt’s shoulder.

It looked just like Nark, who was resting on the king’s shoulder, and Tinasha burst out laughing. “It looks like it wants to come along.”

“Is it…all right to bring one outside the city gates?”

“It’s perfectly fine. I’m sure the local children will be delighted.”

“I’ll be careful to bring it back safe and sound,” said Valt, bowing to the king and queen again before leaving the training grounds.

While the queen often teleported around like it was nothing, Valt’s position made it difficult for him to do the same. Oscar might have freakishly keen powers of observation, so Valt couldn’t afford to overplay his hand.

Thus, he used a transportation array in the castle to teleport to the closest guard station. As he was walking from there to the castle gates, a familiar voice called out to him. “Valt? What is it? Are you finished with work already?”

“Oh, Miralys.”

She was carrying so many flowers she had bought at the market that he couldn't see her face. Had he not heard her voice, he might have thought she was nothing but a gigantic bouquet. "What are you doing with all those?"

"I'm going to decorate the house with them."

"Isn't that a few too many?"

Miralys wasn't the type of girl who adored flowers, so Valt knew there had to be some reason. After a brief awkward pause, she finally admitted, "Someone put in a large order at the florist I go to but never showed to pick it up. The shopkeeper looked so upset that I bought them all."

Valt's eyes grew wide listening to her tale. Miralys had always been extremely wary of other people. But as she settled into a more comfortable life in the city and got to know others while Valt was away serving the crown, she must have begun to change little by little.

Her warmhearted gesture made him smile. "You're a sweet girl, Miralys."

"No, I'm not," she mumbled.

Because he couldn't see her face, he walked up and took half of the blossoms sticking out of her basket. White petals parted to reveal Miralys, her face the faintest shade of pink.

"It'll be too dangerous for you to go home alone like that. I have to head to the castle gates to take care of something, but after that, I'll be free to walk with you."

"But you're at work. They'll get mad."

"They'd be more upset if they knew I let you go home like that. I'll be sure to contact the castle. It'll be fine," Valt assured her, and he set off.

Still looking reluctant, Miralys followed. Then she noticed the little bird perched on Valt's shoulder. "Hey, what's this bird?"

"This is a magical creature made by Queen Tinasha."

"Oh wow. Can I pet it later?"

"Of course. But it's castle property, so I have to bring it back with me."

The gates were just up ahead. The street was packed with bustling crowds, and there was not a cloud in the sky. A pleasant breeze rustled the white flowers in their arms.

The guard stationed at the gates smiled when he saw Valt and the blossoms he was holding. "Taken up flower peddling, chief mage?"

"Not quite. We're just coming from a large purchase. I've been authorized to grant access to the city. Could you show me to the merchants awaiting entry?"

"Yes, right this way," said the guard, turning around to unlock the door behind him.

All of a sudden, an earsplitting noise sounded from the side—an awful grating screech like stones rubbing together. It was coming from the bird on Valt's shoulder.

Miralys frowned. "What is it? What's going on?"

“I don’t know, but…”

The bird was a magic implement created for patrolling purposes by ancient spirit sorcerers.

Before Valt had time to reason out an explanation, the door the guard was about to open split in half, revealing a girl. She was scrawny and wearing rough clothing. Her eyes were bulging, and her neck was tilted at such an angle that it looked broken.

She was clearly not in her right mind, more resembling a corpse than a living being. Valt recognized her, however.

He hadn’t met her in this life, but in other ones, she was sometimes an acquaintance of Tinasha. She was born in Tayiri and fiercely resented how it persecuted mages.

“Tris…?” he blurted.

“Is she okay?” Miralys asked dubiously.

The sight of her so completely transformed made Valt gasp.

A young man appeared from behind Tris, his eyes flashing with dark resentment.

Valt recognized him as well. This was Savas, the prince of Yarda. After the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned fell in battle, he was banished for being her devoted follower.

“What are you doing here…?” Valt asked. He had a bad feeling.

Savas surveyed the streets around him with empty eyes before commanding Tris. “Go.”

The battered girl staggered forward.

That was how it began.

“AAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!”

Miralys crumpled to the ground while letting out a terrible scream. Unfortunately, Valt couldn’t even reach for her, as he was struck on the temple so hard it sent him stumbling. His vision spun.

He didn’t understand what was happening. His head was a mess, and his guts were churning.

Through blurry vision, he attempted to locate the girl he adored.

Miralys was collapsed amid heaps of white flowers, blood pouring from her mouth.

“Mira…lys…?”

While Valt crawled to her, Tris passed right by. Screams soon erupted from somewhere close by.

“AAAAHHH!”

“NOOOOOO!”

Shrieks sounded from everywhere, the stone bird crying in warning through it all.

Valt could sense magic going haywire in the vicinity. Savas let out a twisted, mad laugh. “Ha-ha! So this is the power of a god. Fall to your knees! Suffer your ruin, foolish foes of Leonora!”

The world was dimming as Valt's consciousness slipped. He reached out a trembling hand and caught hold of Miralys's.

No matter how he squinted, he could no longer see the light of her soul. It was already very far away.

The flower petals, dripping with blood, caught the light of the sun and sparkled.

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"You're awake."

When Valt woke next, Doan's voice was the first thing he heard. It was a struggle to get his sluggish body to obey, but he looked around. "Where am I…?"

"The castle, in a temporary hospice room. We brought everyone who didn't die here. A lot are still unconscious."

They were in one of the castle reception chambers, now home to over twenty evenly spaced beds that held ashen-faced patients. A huge magic circle was drawn on the floor; a life-preservation spell. Only one person in the castle could afford to expend magic like that on such a large scale.

"Where's the queen?" Valt asked, but Doan didn't answer. He was sitting next to the bed opposite Valt's. Judging by the blond hair, it had to be Sylvia lying there.

Doan's face was gaunt, and his voice was purposely unemotional when he spoke. "Let me tell you this first. A week has passed since we encountered…*that*. We've managed to take care of it, mostly. We're in the cleanup phase now."

"The…cleanup phase?"

Something had attacked unexpectedly. Reflecting upon it, Valt did have a guess as to what it may have been. All the omens lined up, after all.

The mysterious, unexplained deaths one after another in the east.

Oscar suspected that the very first casualty was the mage who fell to his death at Minnedart. However, something had occurred before that in the vicinity of the fortress—the Ito riders' extensive raiding and subsequent capture.

It probably got released in the aftermath of all that.

Something dwelled in a place sacred to the Ito. Valt had read about it in one of his ancestors' journals. It had to be the exact same *thing* that the ancient spirit sorcerers fled Tayiri to escape. The stone birds were created to patrol for *it*.

"So it was…Irityrdia."

The thing that made mages lose their minds, sent their magic running haywire, and wrecked their spirits and life force.

A force of nature also known by the names World-Splitting Blade and Sleeping Paleface.

Irityrdia—Tayiri's one god—was the true form of what was sealed away inside Tris. Long ago, a mage's body was used to seal it off when it caused havoc. Someone who knew of this must have placed Irityrdia within Tris.

"You know what this is? We finally managed to pinpoint it just yesterday after investigating the Ito ruins," said Doan.

"I read about it a long time ago, although I'd forgotten. I guess that means everyone who died in the east had magic."

"Yeah. Some of them hadn't ever undergone training to control their power, so they didn't register as having any when we investigated. Everyone who died either had magic or was otherwise affected by magic going haywire."

According to the legends, the presence of Irityrdia rendered mages insane in both mind and body, a danger to themselves and others. Irityrdia must have awakened in the aftermath of the battle with the Ito, slowly made its way toward the castle city, leaving a trail of death and destruction in its wake…and gotten captured along the way.

Doan let out a heavy sigh. "It looks like it was Savas's intention to bring Irityrdia into the city. Disguising himself and his group as a merchant caravan and making sure his faulty papers meant the castle didn't have advance notice of his visit—all of it was a trick to lure the queen out."

"I don't…think Savas was the one behind this. Ordinary people wouldn't know about Irityrdia or be able to seal it inside a mage's body. He must have been used as a puppet, since mages can't get close to Irityrdia. One of Leonora's underlings or someone else must be responsible."

Fortunately, even a plot like this hadn't destroyed Farsas. The situation had been resolved in only a week.

Unlike in rural towns and villages, the city contained so many mages that releasing Irityrdia inside it might have razed it to the ground.

Valt finally asked the one thing he'd wanted to know this whole time but hadn't dared to ask. "What happened to Miralys? The girl who was with me when Irityrdia came."

He knew the answer. That was one more reason why Irityrdia had come to the castle city.

Doan stood. "I'll show you. Can you walk?"

"Yes…"

Even after dragging his battered body out of the bed, Valt had to lean on Doan to keep from falling over. When he finally got a look at all the beds in the room, he groaned. "Half the court mages are here."

"And these are the lucky ones. That stone bird the king brought back? What it scattered was an Irityrdia-resistant psychological safeguard created by spirit sorcerers. Those of us who work in the castle were much better equipped to handle it than the mages out in town. It's why you're still sane after coming so close to Irityrdia."

"I see. It spread it all over the castle, and that's why it was empty. The king really has incredible luck…"

At a time of crisis, Valt had received the bare minimum of protection, allowing him to survive a force of nature some called a god. Despite explaining as much to him, Doan only offered a tight smile.

The two left the makeshift hospital, and Doan led Valt to a small parlor. In it was a white bed with flowers decorating the head of it.

Miralys was asleep, breathing faintly. A magic circle for life support was drawn on the floor beneath her.

Valt approached her and gazed down at her pallid face.

"I'll be in the hospice room if you need me," said Doan.

"Sure…"

Once the door clicked shut, Valt dug his nails into his palms hard enough to draw blood.

Miralys would never wake again.

Her soul was gone, along with the magic he'd lent her for self-protection.

Valt took her hand. It was so small. "I should have kept you locked up."

Then she would still be alive. They could have lived alone, just the two of them, without anyone else.

He had always yearned to give her a normal, happy life.

But this was what happened when he believed he'd done that. The world was waiting for that one last straw to say, *"Your time is up. You can't live any longer."*

"It's my fault…"

Miralys would never squeeze his hand back. She would never call him names in that adorable way that she did.

This lifetime ended here.

It had to.

Valt returned to the hospice room and said to Doan, "I have something I need to discuss with the queen. Do you know where she is?"

"She's dead."

The words echoed around the sparsely furnished room.

After a few moments of complete stupefaction, Valt asked, "She's *what*? How?"

"There wasn't much time to deliberate over what to do, and the damage had spread too far. Irityrdia's power was only growing stronger. No one knew it was inside Tris. When she died, it was released, and the situation went completely out of control. Queen Tinasha had no choice but to use her own body as a vessel and hold Irityrdia in check so that Akashia could destroy it."

There was not a trace of emotion in Doan's words.

"So if you need to discuss something, go to the king. He should be in the chapel underground now."

A chapel was built in a grove of trees behind the castle. Its subterranean level served as the royal mausoleum. The witch's corpse, dressed in her wedding clothes, lay enshrined on the altar of a small sanctuary.

The king was standing next to it, staring at his wife's lifeless body. One hand gently carded away the hair from her forehead, and he caressed her smooth cheeks. Valt noticed that the king's fingers were trembling.

Without taking his eyes off Tinasha's lifeless face, the king said, "I thought I was prepared for this, but it turns out I wasn't."

For three days, Irityrdia had laid waste to the city. In that time, nearly three hundred died. The storm that swept through all planes of existence in search of magical power rapidly became more powerful and untouchable… until the queen's death brought the tragedy to a close.

"I knew she wouldn't hesitate to give her life for her country. But for whatever reason, I always thought that only extended to Tuldarr."

Tinasha had died to protect the country she'd married into.

As Akashia had plunged into her, she'd grabbed hold of it and wouldn't allow Oscar to pull it out. That was how fierce her spirit was.

"No one was more careless with their life than she was. I'm going to do everything I can to honor her in return."

"I'm sure…Queen Tinasha was fully aware of that."

She had always been that sort of person.

No matter how many times history repeated, she always chose her king.

Oscar was the only one who knew what her life was worth, which was why she could relax and let herself love him.

The king turned his head to look at Valt, standing in the doorway. His twilight sky–blue eyes held naked remorse. "To be honest, I wanted to pull Akashia out. Even if by force."

If the royal sword had shattered the core inside her, she might have been saved, and Irityrdia would still have been destroyed.

However, the entity had grown too large. Oscar and Tinasha had realized that when the core was shattered—and they made a decision.

The queen's death meant the end for the part of Oscar that was just an ordinary man. He would live the rest of his life out of duty alone.

The young king looked down at his right hand. "This is the first time I've ever hated Akashia's existence… And that stays between us."

"Of course."

For Oscar to bring that up must have meant he'd guessed why Valt was here.

Valt bowed low before his king. "It has not been very long, but I will be retiring from my post. I'm very sorry to leave at such a time."

"That's fine. I'm to blame for not preventing this, and I've done badly by you. I can't apologize enough," Oscar replied. Surely, he knew that Miralys was the first casualty. Valt was the one who let her soul slip away, however. Because he knew this whole time that a fate like this might have awaited her.

"I pray that you keep in good health. May we meet again in another era and in another way."

"Yes," Oscar said. "Indeed."

Their reunion would be in another life. This would be the last occasion they were king and vassal.

Valt bowed low to Oscar with utter sincerity.

Before he left, Valt asked one thing that was on his mind. “If you could go back in time and do it over, what would you change?”

The king’s eyes widened a little. “I’m not sure. But…”

For the first time that day, Oscar gave a tight smile. “If it was only to save or help myself, I know I wouldn’t be able to go through with anything.”

Thus spoke a young man who was born and raised to be king.

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Tinasha was dead.

That meant the Tuldarr treasure vault could no longer be opened, rendering the blue orb of Eleterria inaccessible.

He was seeking the red one, which had been missing for a long time. However, he could hazard a guess based on what he recalled of where it had been used in previous instances. Wandering through the depths of despair, he scoured the mainland for the artifact, following it from person to person.

Years passed in the blink of an eye.

“Somewhere in my mind, I knew that who you were in this lifetime is different from who you were before,” Valt muttered wryly, standing before the small grave where Miralys’s remains were interred. “But you are still you. The world will not diverge. No matter how many lifetimes repeat, you will be yourself, with the same soul.”

It was an unmarked gravestone in the woods. A great many white flowers he had planted bloomed around it. The unpretentious petals brought to mind a memory of Miralys, embarrassed with her arms full of blossoms.

Valt presented the gravestone with a little box. Inside it lay the red orb of Eleterria.

All of the myriad lifetimes he had experienced were the result of this little gem.

It was an artifact that offered unlimited attempts, overwriting the world that should be.

“I will find you again.”

Twenty-five years had passed since her death. Using the red half of Eleterria meant Valt would lose it. Still, he had to go back.

To start fresh and save her.

Valt opened the box and retrieved the item inside.

For the time it took for the world to be demolished and rebuilt anew, he thought only of his beloved wife.

6. Born as Irreplaceable Copies

“Valt, did you fell asleep?” someone asked, shaking his shoulder and jostling him awake from his position slumped over the table. The girl who roused him was gazing down with concern in her green eyes.

Her gaze finally brought him back to reality, and he reached out to stroke her soft cheek. “Morning.”

When Miralys heard that, she pursed her lips. “You dozed off, which must mean you’re exhausted. We should postpone things.”

“I’m perfectly fine. I was just having a little dream of a time long in the past,” he said before rising to his feet. He had only meant to contemplate a few things, but he must have drifted off, wasting precious time.

Still, what he’d dreamed of, that memory of the far distant past, was noteworthy. Those events no longer existed; no memory of them lingered anywhere.

Seeing them now must have carried some significance.

Valt observed the girl before him—her lustrous silver hair, her pale green eyes. In a few years, she would be a glamorous beauty. For the time being, she seemed the sort who counted on him.

He reached out and took this girl who was once his wife into his arms. “Miralys, thank you for everything you’ve done.”

“Where is this coming from? You *are* exhausted, aren’t you?”

“Never mind that, just let me say this. We’re at an important juncture.”

“Don’t make it sound like we’re going to be torn apart forever. Come on. Dinner is waiting,” she replied exasperatedly.

Valt’s eyes fell shut, and he smiled.

This did need to be said now. He hugged her tighter. “I love you. No matter the life or timeline, I’m always so happy with you.”

None of that was fabricated. It was a truth that wouldn’t change, regardless of how many traumas he suffered.

She had kept him going this entire time.

But this Miralys, who had no memory of any timeline but the present, only frowned. “Are you sure you phrased that right? Anyway, I don’t intend to leave you. What about dinner?”

“Right. Sorry.”

“You’re going to be here at the dining table with me, tomorrow and every day after that. Always.”

“Yes,” Valt responded, keeping his voice cheerful as he buried his face in her hair.

He wished that could be so.

One of their lives had been like that.

It had only happened once, but they’d enjoyed a peaceful existence growing old together until death had them part ways.

Once was enough. The love he’d known then was plenty.

He’d sat down at the dining table with her countless times. He’d been so happy, and at the same time, just as sad.

Amid all the lifetimes, so many it made his head spin, Valt could never return the love she constantly lavished on him. It was far too great.

So in exchange, he gave her something else—undeniable proof of his feelings, though that, too, would fade from her memory eventually.

Now he would take to the stage to bring this interminable comedy to a close.

※

The day dawned bright and sunny.

Oscar had come to Tuldarr via his personal transportation array. He gazed up at the sky from the passage leading to the cathedral. Clear water fell from a colonnade he spied in the distance, flowing into the gardens.

Farther back past that was the tower where the ruler dwelled…though Tinasha no longer lived there. She’d abdicated yesterday.

Today was Legis’s coronation.

In just half a year, the reins of the kingdom had traded hands. Two days after stepping down from the throne, the sovereign queen would become Oscar’s wife.

As Oscar reflected on the year that had passed so quickly, he mused that his younger self from before Tinasha would be stunned to see what had transpired. That version of himself believed that, curse or no curse, he would choose the safest possible option for his bride. That or he would marry no one at all and adopt an heir instead.

As he’d grown to understand her, he’d fallen in love.

She was reckless and unmanageable, and he knew freedom when he was with her.

That was something he would have never felt in his life had things progressed normally. Her somewhat clingy and entirely peerless love for him had opened a new door. It brought such tremendous joy that it felt like a miracle.

For that reason, he wanted to give her just as much freedom. Perhaps even more. Even if it took his whole life, he wouldn’t regret it.

“I thought that with so many ceremonies taking place day after day, some of the guests would go home, but the crowd hasn’t diminished,” Oscar remarked.

“Don’t tell me that’s why you put your wedding on the last day.” Doan hissed.

“That was just a coincidence,” Oscar replied. Naturally, he’d checked with Tuldarr’s schedule in advance, but he hadn’t selected a date hoping for a lower attendance. His only request was to make it as soon as possible after Tinasha’s abdication.

In return, both Tuldarr and Farsas were receiving and hosting guests who would be present at all the events. Once Legis’s coronation concluded, Tinasha planned to go to Farsas.

“You know, I haven’t seen her wedding gown yet. I’m really looking forward to it,” Oscar said to Doan.

“Really? That’s a surprise.”

“But I did have her dresses for all the other events made to my tastes.”

“There it is,” Doan quipped dryly, as he so often did. Oscar burst out laughing.

Until the day of Tinasha’s coronation, when she announced she would be abdicating, Oscar had never dreamed of such a future for himself. He’d decided to gift her a new gown every year, since he couldn’t spend his life with her. It made him starkly happy that they had wound up together after so many twists and turns.

That was why he had to carry out the duty he had assigned himself.

Pausing before the entrance to the cathedral, Oscar glanced at the royal sword belted at his waist. “I’m praying we keep making it out alive…”

He hoped they would eliminate all plots against them and never give enemies an opening. They would live together, and he would protect his country.

※

Clouds occasionally streamed past the blue sky out the window. It had to be windy higher up. Tinasha felt a curious longing for the past as she watched.

A door in the back of the room opened, and a young man in formal attire entered. She bowed to him. “All is secure, Your Majesty.”

“I’m not king yet,” answered the man she had called “Your Majesty” with an exasperated smile. At present, Tuldarr had no ruler.

The queen, who had abdicated the day before, flashed a mischievous grin and waved a hand dismissively at the soon-to-be-crowned ruler. “You may as well be. I believe the guests have all arrived.”

“I appreciate them for coming, but it does make me nervous to undergo a coronation ceremony before all the other nations,” Legis admitted.

“You’re lying to me. You’re not nervous at all, are you?”

“You can tell?” Legis said with a laugh, passing some papers to Tinasha.

Legis's impending royal inauguration didn't involve inheriting the mystical spirits, instead emphasizing integrity over formality. For the following six months, Tuldarr would remain a monarchy. After that came the shift to the two-pillar system of monarch and parliament.

Legis followed Tinasha's gaze up to the sky. "I'm glad we have fine weather today. Everyone's worked so hard to make this come together."

"Had it been stormy, I would have changed the weather."

Chuckling, Legis replied, "Spoken like a true spirit sorcerer."

His placid gaze turned remote as he regarded the city streets in the distance. "I love this country. I am prepared to devote my entire life to it."

His tone was full of conviction. Once Legis was king, he'd give all of himself to Tuldarr for as long as he reigned. Such was the path he'd chosen.

However, it would make his life a lonely one. Legis was prepared for that, though. As he had always done, he intended to listen to the opinions of those around him, entertain discussions, and pave the way for a new reign. That was how a king ought to live his life in this era.

Tinasha smiled at the young man who had inherited her country, four hundred years later. "I am sure you will be a much better ruler than I was."

The praise came in a clear, ringing tone. Legis's cheeks were pink as he grinned at her, but a serious look stole back over his face. "I am very glad that I was able to meet you. You've saved the country more times than I can count."

"I feel like I've caused nothing but trouble for you over the past several months, though," she answered, sighing.

Legis had helped Tinasha just as much. It was because of him that her reign was half as long as she'd originally planned. His assistance with royal duties had also permitted her to indulge in selfish things on occasion. None of that would have been possible in the Dark Age.

Safety for mages and peace for all citizens were not mutually exclusive, yet were rarely found together.

Moved almost to tears, Tinasha bowed to Legis. "I should be the one offering you my gratitude. You've taught me so much."

"Not at all. I've learned from *you*. Come back and visit whenever you feel like it."

"Now that you've offered, I definitely will. I know Oscar's going to waste no time teasing me once we're married."

"Please do. I'll keep your rooms open. You can confide in me anytime," Legis assured her.

"I'll admit to feeling hesitant about the prospect of wasting a king's time with my personal gripes and grievances…"

After four centuries, Tinasha no longer had a home to go back to. Once she married into Farsas, she would have a new place as its queen consort. It meant the world to her that Legis and Tuldarr would still be a home for whenever she had trouble.

“I’m so glad I could come to this time period,” she stated, meaning every word.

Legis smiled. “I’m delighted that I could be of service. I wish you all the happiness in the world.”

He bowed deeply to her before leaving for the coronation. Sunlight streamed in from the windows, shining off the back of his official dress. Tinasha watched him go with a myriad of emotions in her throat.

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What was despair?

It wasn’t the same thing as death.

Death was something he had experienced many times already. He had repeatedly witnessed his own passing and the passing of others.

Tragedy had numbed his emotions.

He stood frozen at the beginning of the beginning, screaming and insane. Ultimately, he had come to believe that no matter when or how a person dies, death itself had no meaning.

※

The coronation began on schedule.

Tinasha was not seated with the guests, for she was in charge of security. That stationed her right to the side of the entryway, where she could monitor the network of spells she had laid out.

She stood to the back of the central altar, and it obscured her view, creating a blind spot of the front. Still, she knew Oscar was seated there. They had both been so busy in the past few days that they hadn’t been able to meet, which was in line with the Farsas tradition for the betrothed anyway. As often happened whenever Tinasha was incredibly swamped, the whole thing felt like some nostalgic dream of bygone days.

“Although he’d probably be annoyed with me if I told him that,” she murmured.

As her wedding was not for another two days, she was between titles at present. While Tuldarr treated her like a royal, she was no longer a queen, nor a princess.

She had taken advantage of that to position herself behind the scenes of the coronation.

Tinasha’s dark eyes were closed so she could focus her awareness on the defensive spells, but she still heard Legis delivering his opening remarks up on the dais. His pointed yet tolerant message expressed his personality very well; Tinasha smiled.

For the time being, she didn’t detect anything suspicious. The coronation was scheduled to finish in another five minutes. Tinasha sensed Pamyra’s

magic as the woman approached on patrol, and she waved to her without opening her eyes.

And that was when Tinasha furrowed her brow.

There was something—a voice only she could hear was calling.

The magic was faint, though that did not reflect on the strength of the speaker's power. Instead, it meant the magic had been engineered only to reach her, cleverly weaving through the castle wards. Had such an adroit mage in possession of such spectacular magic served the court, their name might have gone down in history.

Instead, this person operated in the shadows, plotting and scheming. Tinasha couldn't imagine what this certain individual, endowed with vast archives and memories of lost lifetimes, was thinking, or what they might attempt.

The message that came to her consisted of congratulations on the new king's coronation and well wishes on her upcoming nuptials. But there was no way she could accept that at face value, nor did she trust the sender to be genuine.

Legis's speech finished.

Raucous applause burst forth at this birth of a new king. The fervor and excitement in the cathedral reached a fever pitch.

With this, a new chapter of history would dawn on Tuldarr. Tinasha wished the people living in this country eternal happiness. Hopefully, they would know the protection of a well-founded government.

That was one more reason why she couldn't let any schemers do as they pleased.

The network of security spells Tinasha had set for the coronation had fifteen parts, each monitored by several mages. She was only within the spells' coverage to keep an eye on them. Her absence would not alter the magic.

The decision took only a moment. Tinasha honed her consciousness to a point and followed the voice, locating it at the edge of a very small, very fine hidden spell.

He wasn't going to get away again. She wouldn't let him.

This time, she would capture him, control him, and make him surrender. There could be no mercy.

At last, she located him. He was within Tuldarr but was a considerable distance away.

Such a gap didn't matter to Tinasha, though. She forced a link to the place, tracing his magic and pulling the coordinates from his spell.

As her lips curled in a defiant grin, she vanished with no incantation, leaving the cathedral brimming with enthusiasm.

Tinasha's surroundings rearranged around her. She had landed in the middle of a wide field. Wind streamed across the grass, making it undulate like waves.

Standing in the center of the field was Valt, who smiled delightedly at her arrival. “Ah, so you came. You’re the only one who could trace my location, despite all my camouflaging.”

Without answering, Tinasha lifted her right hand, placing a teleportation ban on the area.

Valt looked surprised, but it was unclear whether this was because of the speed of her action, her decision, or the complexity of the spell. His tone was glowing as he praised her. “Wonderful work as always. But there’s no need to rush. I have no intention of running.”

“How admirable. Does that mean you’re ready to die?”

“Of course. I am ready to die anywhere and at any time. I’ve been ready for a long time. However…this moment will never come again. Do you truly understand the significance of that?”

Valt gazed up. Clouds drifted rapidly across the sky.

Loneliness he failed to suppress shone in his eyes—an emotion he couldn’t share with others.

He pointed to a spot on the empty field. “Once upon a time, an azure tower stood there. The tower was equipped with a series of trials, be it traps or monsters. Those who beat them all and reached the top level would be granted a wish from the witch who lived there. But now that tower doesn’t exist—it never did.”

“And was that witch me?”

“It was. The Witch of the Azure Moon—the fifth witch and hailed as the strongest. That is a version of you that no longer exists. Are you surprised?”

“A little, although I had some vague idea,” Tinasha replied, tucking her black hair behind her ears to keep the wind from whipping it up.

How had she been married to Oscar before the world was changed, despite their differing eras?

Why hadn’t he ever explained it?

There was only one sort of being who possessed mighty power and lived for centuries.

Tinasha had remained unconvinced by that alone, however. That was why she’d frozen up when Valt said that name so abruptly the last time they spoke.

Valt’s gaze dropped to the barren plain at their feet. “You built a tower in this wasteland and lived there alone. You were much stronger and colder than you are now. That’s why I rejoiced when I discovered that you hadn’t become a witch this time and that you had put yourself in a magic sleep. Come, let’s go and retrieve the other half of Eleterria. It’s time to bring all of this to an end.”

Valt drew out a small white box. Both of them knew what was inside. While on guard against him, for she had no idea what he was thinking, Tinasha licked her lips. “I’m not going. Give that back.”

“You’ll go, and willingly. I know how effective hostages are at swaying you,” Valt said lightly, and he snapped his fingers. The world shuddered a bit.

A hint of magic drifted through the air. Tinasha frowned. “What are you…?”

“I’ve put just a bit of power into a spell. You can tell what it is, can’t you?” Valt replied, closing his eyes and looking confident.

Tinasha glared daggers at that calm, composed face and followed the faint traces of magic to their source. It went on and on, stretching far into the distance on a path that branched and forked, but finally, she grasped the complete picture.

Once Tinasha understood, she was struck dumb. “That’s insane.”

“Do you see? The best hostage I could take to move you would be Tuldarr itself.”

Valt’s spell was an enormous magic circle linking five cities and towns in a ring, with the castle city in the center. Rigged up out of sight, it would erupt into a conflagration once triggered. The flames would then consume the lives of all inside, using them as catalysts to summon up more magic until they swirled into a firestorm that would destroy the entire country. The spell was designed to massacre on a terrifyingly large scale.

A twisted expression formed on Valt’s face. “If you refuse to cooperate, I will ruin Tuldarr.”

Tinasha shuddered to imagine such an unprecedented forbidden curse.

There was, at least, magic in place within the capital city that prevented any unauthorized widespread spells. Yet this had slipped past that defense.

“No… Did you shrink down the magic for the spell itself to the smallest it could go? You made it so weak it would never have any effect, ordinarily. To compensate, you made the configuration as intricate and complex as possible…”

“Ultimately, it’s much more difficult to defend than to attack. All the deciding power lies with the aggressor: where to attack, how to do it, and when. Admittedly, it would’ve been difficult for any ordinary person to lay the groundwork on such a massive scale. We drew up dozens and dozens of spells so small you wouldn’t notice until the very last minute, and then we connected them. Oh, but it did make us uneasy when someone discovered a half-finished spell once and tried to use it,” Valt explained blithely, though the level of spellwork here was anything but normal.

To have come so far with such a massive, forbidden work required vast reserves of magic, exceptional spell-casting ability, and fierce tenacity.

And not only that…

“Where did you learn of this spell?” Tinasha demanded. “There are many forbidden curses that use souls as catalysts to summon magic, but this is one that was used four hundred years ago, and no records remain of it.”

It was the very spell that Lanak, Tinasha's fellow candidate for the throne, sought to use on her when she was young. Here it was again, targeting her anew, but knowledge of this magic should have perished.

Valt gave her a wan smile. "We acquire knowledge and pass it down. Some of us, in lifetimes past, were close to your fiancé."

"This isn't funny. Are you saying that your people have acted in the shadows of history this entire time?"

"Surely not. The Time-Reader clan is not as all-encompassing as you may believe. Our founder was only one person. The next heir can't awaken to their powers until their predecessor dies. The only thing we know about the other heirs, past and future, is their names. Everything else we must relay via journals and memoirs. It's an inconvenient, lonely existence," Valt said bitterly, his face conveying only sadness and gloom.

But then his enigmatic smile returned. "It has taken more than three months, from the time we began laying the groundwork for the spell up until the finishing touches. We had to be exceedingly careful not to trip Tuldarr's surveillance network and alert you. Ironically, you would have noticed if we'd prepared this in Farsas. Considering the scope of this spell, it is constantly emitting low-grade magic. However, Tuldarr is a nation of mages. The faintest trace of odd magic wouldn't give you pause, would it?"

Tinasha gritted her teeth at the enormity of her blunder. Yes, she had sensed stray bits of magical power, and she'd found them strange—many times now. But as Valt said, she had never investigated.

And now, her carelessness had brought her here, to the worst possible outcome.

Caught in the full force of Tinasha's murderous stare, Valt shrugged. "Allow me to say that I am not the one who cast this spell. If you kill me, the caster will trigger it. Ah, and don't think of telling anyone. No one can do a thing to stop this. Within the spell are five definition names."

Such was the thoroughness of Valt's plan, and how cautiously he had arranged everything.

Tinasha's irrepressible emotions made her magic start to roil and seethe. "You would go this far to get Eleterria…? What do you mean to do by changing the past?"

"I have a mere personal wish," he answered, which was the exact opposite of what Tinasha, one who would do anything for her country, had expected.

She understood that some people weren't like her. For most people, in fact, what was worth doing and what they wanted to do didn't equal out. Valt was a prime example.

"I feel no guilt at all, no matter how many I must sacrifice. Regardless of how I die, it is only for a moment. It's all overwritten before long. That's how we've always done things."

Tinasha sensed a quietly flickering flame deep within the man's eyes and voice.

A cynical grin twisted Valt's lips. "Shall I let you in on a little something? Do you want to know why I picked Tuldarr for my target?"

"Isn't it because it's my homeland?"

"Yes, that's certainly part of it. I know the nation is your weak point. You'd never abandon Tuldarr. But there's more to it than that. Ordinarily, that country shouldn't exist."

"Excuse me?"

What was he on about? Tuldarr had been founded five hundred years before Tinasha's birth. It was one of the most long-lived nations in all the land.

What did Valt mean by claiming it shouldn't exist? How had things gotten overwritten to make that…?

Gasping, Tinasha clapped a trembling hand over her mouth. "No…!"

That couldn't be. He was referring to her.

On that night four centuries ago, she would have been the only casualty if *he* hadn't stepped in.

After suffering a betrayal by her only family in the world, she fled Tuldarr and became a witch. That was the original sequence of events. Yet because she'd met Oscar back then and he told her that he knew she could control the colossal magic coursing and raging through her, none of it had ever transpired. Because of Tinasha…

"Tuldarr actually fell the night they ripped you open," Valt stated, the words sounding heartless to Tinasha's ears.

She pressed an unconscious hand to her unmarred stomach. "But how? I controlled that magic…"

"Yes. You triumphed even on the brink of death. But the catalyst for the forbidden curse was not the same. Magic summoned using Lanak as the sacrifice would be quite different from that summoned by offering you. You were unable to take it all in, and the wild power destroyed Tuldarr and sent shock waves through the rest of the mainland. In the true course of events, almost all of what was once Tuldarr is now a barren wasteland razed by a forbidden curse."

"But… No…"

Her vision was going dark.

The energy was sapped from her body.

Tinasha struggled to breathe. Without her will to guide it, her body broke into a shivering fit.

Tuldarr had been her life.

Spilling blood had never been something Tinasha had questioned. She'd killed her emotions, too. Even when she couldn't live up to a single one of her ideals, she had made the best choice possible. That was how it had been since she was born. Growing up all alone in a huge, empty wing of the castle, the betrayal of the man she saw as her brother, and the sacrifice of the only person to love and rescue her—she had borne all of it to keep Tuldarr safe.

It went beyond duty. Tinasha had endured out of love for Tuldarr, despite its taking everything she had to give.

And now, she was being told that it was never meant to exist. In the true course of events, Tuldarr would have perished with her.

“It can’t be…”

Her throat was dry as a bone, and she could barely force the words out.

Valt eyed Tinasha with a modicum of sadness. “When Eleterria alters the world, it remakes itself by keeping a bare minimum of things the same. However, the survival of a nation that should have perished is too much. It doesn’t pain me at all to take Tuldarr as my hostage, because it should never have existed anyway. And what about you? Does it not pain you at all to look at Cezar, which lost so many of its people because Tuldarr survived? If Tuldarr had collapsed, as it should have, that would have never happened to Cezar.”

Tinasha had nothing to say in the face of such a brutal provocation.

Cezar’s downfall came after it murdered its own people to give rise to an army of the dead. Could that have been averted in a world without a prosperous Tuldarr?

If all of this were true, that meant that Tinasha—and Oscar—were at fault for altering history.

“I…”

Tinasha felt as though she’d plummeted after losing her footing.

Alarm bells went off inside her head, pleading that she denounce her enemy’s claims as lies.

However, Tinasha did not heed that warning.

She closed her weary eyes. The discord felt like it lasted for an eternity.

Yes, it might all be a lie to throw her off. Yet it could just as easily be true. There was no way she could know.

What was she to do, then?

She lifted her head. Her dark eyes blazed with the bitterness of her decision and with her sheer force of will.

“Even if you’re right, I won’t allow you to claim your actions are guiltless. You are the one who summoned up an evil god in Cezar, and you are the one attempting to destroy Tuldarr.”

When Valt heard that declaration, he couldn’t hide the bitterness in his smile. “That’s true. We’re both at fault. We keep betraying the world.”

How could one choose what to keep and what to abandon?

Humans had made their selections repeatedly, over and over. And this was the end result.

“I will protect my country. Tuldarr is alive and well. That may be the result of altering the past, but I will never choose to abandon a country that is here now.”

This was Tinasha’s conclusion. She would protect the people in front of her.

Although she stood upon the back of an old crime, her only option was to move forward from where she stood.

Valt's gaze turned distant once he heard that. "I suspected that would be your answer. You've never turned your back on your people, even dead ones. You've chosen to live alone for four hundred years, all for them."

"I don't like it when you talk about things I have no memory of."

"It's true. You were very fierce. Once, you even gave your life to save the people of Farsas," Valt said. His voice choked up for only a moment before he regained composure. "You will accede to my demands to save your country. Is the remaining half of Eleterria in the Tuldarr treasure vault?"

Tinasha hesitated over how to answer.

Could she hope to trick him? She wanted to discover what Valt was after.

"What will you do with both of the orbs? You only need one to change the past."

"I know. I've used one myself. But I want to change the future."

"You want to travel forward in time?"

Whether going to the past or future, both were about knowing what would happen down the line and dealing with it before it happened. When traveling to the past, however, the user ceased to exist once events were sufficiently altered, and they were erased from the new future.

Jumping to the future meant that the person who returned with knowledge of eventualities would not disappear. As long as the present was the true timeline, they could keep making moves forever. That was certainly an advantage.

"What exactly do you intend to accomplish?"

"I'll tell you soon enough, once I have both. Now, let's hear your answer."

Tinasha couldn't delay things any longer. Her very country was on the line.

With her voice dry and hoarse, Tinasha told Valt the truth. "The other Eleterria…is in the Farsas treasure vault."

She bit her lip. There was no knowing the right decision. It was all she could manage to follow the course that kept things from falling to pieces before her.

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When the attendees filtered into the great hall after Legis's coronation concluded, Oscar—one of the guests of honor—noticed that his fiancée was not there. "What? Is she planning to lurk behind the scenes the entire time?"

And here he thought he'd get to see her in full regalia for the first time in a while. While it was Farsas custom for the bride and groom not to see each other before the ceremony, that didn't mean he was a fan of it. Just

thinking about how long it had been since he'd last glimpsed her adorable smile sent his mood plummeting.

All that said, he hadn't come for her. He was there to congratulate Legis, the new king. Farsas and Tuldarr would have a long and fruitful relationship going forward.

With that on Oscar's mind as he made his way over to his new fellow king, he was surprised to find Legis approaching him as well. After the briefest of greetings, he leaned in to Oscar and whispered, "Do you know where she is?"

"Tinasha? I haven't seen her… Did she do something again?"

"She's gone. Evidently, she vanished toward the end of the coronation and hasn't come back since."

"Oh."

The two kings exchanged glances, unsure of what to make of this inexplicable and unpredicted turn of events.

In a tight voice, Oscar said, "I think Valt believes the other half of Eleterria is in Tuldarr."

"I'll launch a search for him immediately, including around the treasure vault. He might have set a trap there."

"To be on the safe side, I'll return to Farsas and notify you if I learn anything."

"Please do," said Legis.

The pair had no idea that, at that very moment, Tuldarr itself was balancing on the scales of destiny.

Oscar stalked out of the great hall with a foreboding look on his face.

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Valt's recollection of his very first life was already hazy.

His father hadn't known what he was until Valt was around five. That year, when his grandfather passed away in some distant city, his father inherited the title of Time-Reader. Valt couldn't imagine his father's surprise, nor how much it shook him to experience his first rewinding of time. His father was a gentle, kind man, though Valt did recall him occasionally muttering, "That can't be. Impossible."

In his first life, Valt was twenty-one when his father died in a carriage accident. Upon his demise, Valt realized everything about the magic orbs that could alter the past and the clan of Time-Readers who kept records of lost histories.

It took him a while to believe it all, though, because he hadn't yet seen these archives he was meant to safeguard.

He continued his life, much the same as his father had, thinking, *That can't be. Impossible.* Until one day, time rewound.

Valt's father had been astonished the first time he experienced it. He thought he'd died, but he discovered he was living his life over from an

earlier point—back when his son was only an infant. Things continued, and he remained perplexed until he died when Valt was twenty-one.

That repeated twenty-seven times.

Valt had never spoken to his father about a Time-Reader heir's duty, because Valt had no memory of the heirs while his father was alive. His father left no arrangements of any kind for after his death. There were heaps of their ancestors' journals and records stacked in his room, though. Valt's father had taken them after his own father's passing.

The number of times an heir experienced a rewinding of time varied. Valt's own far eclipsed his father's, but even his had been on the high side, owing to the many times the red orb of Eleterria changed hands during that period.

But despite the alterations, history still progressed in fits and starts. Time regressed by decades, but not centuries. Those heirs unfortunate enough to be living through an era of repeated misuse of Eleterria had to bear it in silence and wait for their age to pass.

That had been too much for Valt's father.

Valt remembered the one and only time his father had lectured him on the subject.

"Once I'm dead, you'll know for the first time what I was and what you are."

He was talking about the artifact. Perhaps those were his parting words to his son.

"The world is waiting for one last straw. That which will undo all the interventions and restore it to its original shape."

What he said was undoubtedly true.

That was why the world kept chasing Miralys down.

"Valt, are you okay?" the girl called to him telepathically, her voice anxious.

"Yeah," he replied, still facing forward. He couldn't tell her the truth. He had to keep it hidden until the end. If she knew, she would place him above her own future. That had happened on countless occasions, so he would prevent it this time. At last, she would know a happy existence.

The hallways of Farsas Castle looked as peaceful as ever. A woman with long black hair walked a few paces ahead of Valt, her beauty catching the eyes of passing guards and mages who bowed to her. It was a sight he hadn't seen in a very long time. There was a clear dollop of fear mixed into the gazes, however.

The Witch of the Azure Moon was the strongest in all the land, possessed of the mightiest magic in history.

The invisibility spell she had placed on Valt held fast; no one noticed his presence. Even the court mages were fooled. Such was her power.

The two of them strode along quickly toward the Farsas treasure vault. Once they were out of view, Valt whispered to Tinasha, "Is teleporting directly into the treasure vault beyond even your capabilities?"

“Of course not, but we’d be detected immediately. Would you like the castle to discover that something is amiss?”

“No. We’ll keep going like this,” he said. Valt knew this palace inside and out. He followed after Tinasha but was sure of his way, had he been alone. After a sigh, he remarked, “I never expected you to acquire one of them only to transfer it to Farsas.”

“I knew you wouldn’t expect it, which is exactly why I did so.”

“You certainly trust the Akashia swordsman a great deal.”

“Of course I do,” Tinasha spat.

Valt focused on that reaction. When last had he seen her like this? He was now the only one to remember her as the queen consort of this nation.

“Destiny…has always had some twists in store for you. I do truly wish for you to be happy, but you’re just too powerful for that. I’m sorry.” It was an honest apology. Valt really did wish that Tinasha could live out her days pleasantly.

It wasn’t to be, though. The world was like that all too often.

Tinasha glanced at Valt. He couldn’t decipher what emotion flickered across those dark eyes. Decisively and vehemently, she hissed. “My life is entirely what I have chosen.”

She sounded exactly like the queen of Farsas she had been in another life.

Tinasha turned left down a different corridor and faced two treasure vault guards.

While surprised to see Tinasha, they bowed to her. Sheepishly, she explained, “My apologies, but Oscar has asked me to retrieve something. Could you let me pass?”

Only the authorized were allowed entry to the treasure vault. That was how things normally worked, but everyone knew that Tinasha would be queen in two days and how much the king doted on her.

She was powerful enough to force her way in if she desired. There was no need for her to request permission, which lent credence to her story.

That line of thinking informed the guards’ decision. “Yes, my lady. Please be careful.”

“Thank you,” Tinasha replied as the guards willingly stepped aside to let her through. Once out of their sight, she breathed a little sigh. After turning two more corners, she saw the treasure vault come into view. She approached its heavy doors and pushed them open with magic.

Within was a pedestal that had held one part of Eleterria until Valt stole it from this very spot. Now it held another box. Recognizing it, Valt exhaled with relief.

As she dismantled the barrier around the pedestal, Tinasha snapped, “There. Is that what you need? Will you undo the spell in Tuldarr?”

“Not just yet. We’re only getting started,” Valt said, drawing an identical box from his pocket and offering it to Tinasha. She frowned at him suspiciously.

In resounding tones, he said, “Now you will destroy Eleterria for me and fulfill my mission.”

Tinasha stood aghast. “Excuse me?”

The severity in Valt’s voice did not falter as he explained, “Both must be destroyed at the same time. Breaking one will trigger the other to overwrite its twin’s demise. This is why there are two.”

The two orbs protected each other. Although only one was needed to go back in time, there were two to ensure that both remained.

“In the past, I’ve destroyed one of the orbs numerous times, only for time to rewind. Eventually, I learned that both had to be shattered simultaneously, and you are the only one powerful enough to accomplish the feat. You broke an outsiders’ artifact just the other day, did you not?”

Valt was referring to the Mirror of Oblivion.

Shamelessly, he continued, “Yes, you’re the strongest in all of history, but because you didn’t become a witch, you’re an inferior version of who you were meant to be. That’s why I tested your power. How fortunate for me that you absorbed Simila’s incarnation.”

“You…”

Every action, this entire time, had played right into Valt’s hands on a chessboard he had set.

From the shadows, he’d puppeteered events, sending formidable enemies after Tinasha in a bid to hone her power.

While awaiting his chance to steal Eleterria back, Valt had prepared Tinasha for her role as the architect of the orbs’ destruction. The Simila incident had enhanced Tinasha’s magic tremendously.

But why did he want the artifact destroyed?

Without making any effort to hide her confusion, Tinasha questioned, “Didn’t you want to change the future?”

“I do. I want to rip down this mess of a canvas that’s been painted over too many times and restore the true future.”

For a moment, fury burned in Valt’s eyes, but he swiftly quashed it, replacing the fire with his usual placid smile. He placed the box holding the stolen Eleterria on the pedestal.

“The records say it all began with the death of a child. The cause of death isn’t mentioned, and it’s irrelevant anyway. As the child’s mother sobbed over the corpse, she sensed someone nearby. A voice told her that it offered the salvation she desired. She then received the two Eleterria orbs, used them to go back in time, saved her child, and died.”

“And it was an…outsider who gave them to her?”

“Yes. An interloper from beyond our world. You don’t seem to find that terribly difficult to believe.”

“Well, according to Travis, I should have no reason to doubt the existence of these outsiders, considering we know that their artifacts exist. Evidently…he once met someone who came from outside our world.”

“Really? It’s the first I’ve heard of that. I thought the outsiders only sent in objects, never entering personally. There are a total of twelve such artifacts. You’ve destroyed the ruins and the mirror, leaving ten.”

Both the ruins, which captured and stored information on humans, and the mirror, which absorbed and entrapped souls, were unusually powerful and endowed with abilities that defied the laws of magic.

“So outsiders really do exist, then,” Tinasha said.

“They do. I don’t know what they are, but they’re certainly not deities. Following the Age of Gods and prior to the start of the Dark Age, there is a blank period of time. That was when they zeroed in on our world, introduced these experimental items, and recorded what we do like we were toys in a miniature garden.”

Valt studied Tinasha’s reaction.

Before, in many other lives, he had told her this truth. In response, the witch always asked, *“What exactly is this family of Time-Readers?”*

This time was no different, as Tinasha repeated the inquiry verbatim. She never changed. Valt chuckled before giving the same answer.

“We are the descendants of that first child saved by time travel. Ever since Eleterria was first given to humans, one member of my lineage per generation has been trapped as part of the artifact’s power. Our souls are used as record sheets.”

“What…? Your souls?”

“Outsiders’ artifacts defy the laws of magic because the artifacts are each powered by fundamentals from beyond this world. Didn’t it strike you as odd that a tiny little orb could be so powerful as to overwrite the world by turning back time?”

“Well…yes. It didn’t map to the scale of it at all.”

“Exactly. That’s because Eleterria incorporates the soul of the current Time-Reader heir when it activates. Once it’s triggered, it calls up a specified point in time from the pool of memories the world has stored and reproduces it. The soul of the heir serves as the anchor that stabilizes that specified point and then acts as the record board where a log of usage is inscribed. The names of all the heirs, past and future, are also written upon that board. Our ability to retain memories of the lifetimes we’ve repeated is only a by-product of all of that.”

Whoever the outsider that came up with such a mechanism was, they must have been ignorant of the acute suffering of the humans whose souls would be used for this. Because Valt’s family was only alive thanks to Eleterria, the system would abuse them for centuries to come.

Valt tapped his forehead, his smile not reaching his eyes. “I have a complete log of everyone who’s ever used Eleterria and why stored in here. At present, the last time it was used was sixteen years ago so that the late Queen Rosalia of Farsas could save her son’s life. And Eleterria’s most massive overwrite happened four hundred years ago, when the twenty-first

king of Farsas, Oscar Lyeth Increatos Loz Farsas, changed the past for his wife, a witch. It all adds up, doesn't it?"

Tinasha's jaw had dropped, which Valt observed with a tight grin.

Lives, rewound abruptly because someone else wished it so. Memories, accruing and overlapping. That would be enough torture to crush the average person. The worst part of it all was that it was only a side effect.

Irritation welling up within him, Valt let his gaze wander. Slowly, his head turned as his gaze went beyond the castle walls and onto the wider world. Finally, he fixed his eyes on Tinasha again. "You probably don't understand, being the current version of yourself. But as a witch, you comprehended me a little, as you were also someone who had lived for a long time under the crushing weight of your memory."

An image of that all-powerful witch superimposed itself over the present Tinasha's face.

They were the same and yet very different. The Tinasha who was familiar with the eons of time always had a vaguely sad, self-deprecating aura.

"I'm not talking about four centuries here," Valt went on. "I've endured through *millennia*. There is only ever one heir who is unable to share the experience of repeating lifetimes with anyone else. Go on, visualize the horror of it. No matter what, my father always committed suicide. When I was seventeen, when I was thirteen, when I was ten… Everything you thought you'd already lived through comes back, and you must experience it again. It becomes unbearable."

At first, Valt decided his ancestors should have never had children, that someone somewhere should have cut off the line. It wasn't until much later that he learned why that wouldn't have solved anything.

"Sometimes, I've gone back only a day in time. Sometimes I've returned many years. I've seen things rewound to before my birth and relived that time. We don't know when or where time will repeat, but it will, mercilessly. Only at the very beginning was I happy to learn what the future held. I grew sick of it fast. It needled at me, made me feel like I would burst. I've died more times than I can count, but then I'm back again. How many more times must I repeat this?"

A tragedy taken too far became a comedy.

On this stage, all the players of the world were dancing against their will. It was time to bring the curtain down.

"I've attempted to destroy Eleterria, but ordinary power levels cannot break an outsiders' artifact, let alone two of them. Along the way, I realized you were the only person capable of doing it, but either I wasn't able to get in touch with you, or I died before I could. Everything that could go wrong did, and I had my share of frustrating experiences. But then something happened that wasn't supposed to. Someone went back four hundred years in time and changed history. You were no longer a witch."

"Me not becoming a witch is something that wasn't supposed to happen?" Tinasha muttered.

Valt gave her a pained smile. “Do you know what must transpire in order for Eleterria to activate? Have you wondered how it gets the coordinates for the targeted point in time? The soul of the current heir acts as the anchor, but that’s not what makes things rewind to the desired time in specific.”

It was a crafty artifact. Valt knew because he’d used it himself.

“Those orbs react to human attachment—love, hate, whatever. Any strong emotion will set one off. That means that a jump of hundreds of years shouldn’t be possible, ordinarily speaking. No one could feel such a powerful attachment to someone that far in the past, right? But there was a lone exception—a man who loved a witch and made her his wife. Your husband.”

Tinasha’s eyes widened.

The artifact was designed so anyone sufficiently determined could change the past.

But that was only half of it. Resolve alone with no feeling behind it wouldn’t trigger the artifact.

Only the desire to use Eleterria, even at the cost of one’s own life, would remake the world anew.

“The heir four hundred years ago must have been pretty surprised. Just when he thought the cycle was over and he could enjoy his final rest, his own era started up again.”

It was all too easy for Valt to imagine his ancestor’s shock. He must have felt astonishment that bordered on despair—enough to make him scrawl a curse upon future generations in the records.

“But on the contrary, it gave me hope. I dared to think…if you weren’t a witch, and if you came to this time period in search of him, then this may be the timeline where everything goes as planned.”

And now, that hope was paying off.

All of Valt’s meticulous preparations had successfully tripped Tinasha up.

Tinasha, with all of her fantastic power, had rarely showed herself in previous timelines. Even once she met and married Oscar, she would refuse to listen to any request that sounded remotely fishy.

But she was different now. While she could be cruel, she was also lost.

The fact that Tuldarr had not fallen to ruin also worked to Valt’s benefit. He knew that when she’d been a witch, she chose to continue living for the Tuldarr citizens who perished and turned to souls without any sense of who they were. He was well aware that Tinasha would never, under any circumstances, abandon her country.

This chance would never come again.

If Valt let it slip by, salvation would elude him and his beloved for all time.

He had to detach them from the world before it caught up.

“There is no such thing as a world where everyone is happy. Saving one person means that someone else will be sacrificed. And Eleterria will always

get used as long as there is misery in the world. But I'm done with all of that. Our worldviews are all so limited. The exact same sand dune collapses only to be rebuilt, over and over. How much longer must I go along with it? It's foolish and selfish to believe that saving those important to you means nothing else matters. It's infuriating."

It really was foolish. And Valt was one of those fools.

He eyed the woman who would become the world's trump card.

"That's why I want us to end this. You're going to destroy it. You're the only one who can."

At last, this farce would draw to a close.

Tinasha stared back at Valt. Then she glanced over at the two orbs on the pedestal—the artifact given to a mother who lost her child a long, long time ago.

That was how everything started. And ever since, Eleterria had inflicted pain on human souls and caused indissoluble anguish, even as it reflected people's strongest emotions and desires. It had altered reality, something that should have been unimaginable.

All because of one simple wish to save someone else.

That was certainly absurd and self-centered. And yet…

"I once tried to use it myself to save a child who was killed," Tinasha admitted softly, her eyes on the Eleterria orb. "But it didn't activate. Probably because, as you said, I had no true attachment to that boy."

If she were the mother of that fallen child, she *would* have been able to use it to rewind time, without question. But it wasn't to be. That bereaved mother did not have an otherworldly artifact—only the cold, dead body of her son. Tinasha could still vividly remember the sight of her sobbing, hunched over his corpse.

"Yes, it may be true that not being able to go back in time to save another is natural and right. All of you have suffered so much from Eleterria's use. I can't ignore that," Tinasha said, tipping her head up to gaze at Valt. Her face was puckered, as if she were on the verge of tears. "But I can't deny the wishes of those who use it. That's the human…heart we're talking about."

She couldn't refute Valt's despair and suffering, yet she also acknowledged the desires of those who sought to alter history.

Tinasha's eyes grew hot with tears, and she looked away. Her heart ached because that little girl who'd been rescued once still lived within her. She understood the mentality of those who used the orbs. Changing the past and history would revise people's relationships, too. While it was foolish to desire that someone else live, even at the cost of another's existence, she also found it to be a very sacred thing.

Valt's voice cracked as he replied, "You only feel that way because you were rescued by someone who used Eleterria…"

“No. I’m positive it was only a coincidence that allowed *him* to save me. When we first met, he said that he didn’t know why he’d traveled back in time, and he wanted to return.”

Oscar had unwittingly activated Eleterria. That proved how great his love for his wife was.

Thus, Tinasha’s own experiences weren’t informing her opinion. “A desire to save the people we love, even if it goes against all logic, is an extremely common, extremely human emotion. Denying that would be tantamount to refuting our humanity.”

“Even if…the end result is the reshaping of your fate and that of all those around you? You never know if someone’s tampering with history would render you unhappy.”

“Even so, a person’s strength of emotion is what activates Eleterria. That means it is a tool for human salvation.”

Tinasha touched a corner of the pedestal, finding the stone to be colder than her tears. “The true object of your resentment is not the people who used the orbs. There’s a real reason why you feel you must destroy Eleterria rather than simply seal them from use. What is it?”

The wounds Eleterria had inflicted on Valt were surely unspeakable.

But why was he so dead set on destroying the artifact completely, which would be far more difficult than only rendering it permanently unusable? She had yet to press him on that.

Tinasha tore her gaze away from the red and blue orbs and stared at Valt. As he looked back, his eyes blazed with a soul ground down by many, many long years—a flame that would never be extinguished.

“The world is waiting for a revolution.”

“What?”

“That’s what my father said. He used to say that each time our world is altered, another pin gets stuck into it. So it’s waiting for one last straw that will uproot the changes and restore things to their original form.”

“‘The world is waiting for a revolution’…”

It was the exact same phrase uttered by the Witch of the Water when she gave Tinasha’s fortune.

Did that mean that the way she and Valt were facing off was also part of the world’s wishes?

In a bland, emotionless tone, Valt said, “Sooner or later, it will reach its limit. Someone has to do this. Our world has already reached a standstill. The furthest date in history is only another thirty-one years from now. No matter how often time is rewound, things never progress beyond that point. One Eleterria or the other will be used. Don’t you think that’s abnormal, even considering that this era has seen record levels of time travel? Eleterria’s survival means everything will stagnate.”

It was a frightening truth. Tinasha’s eyes grew wide again.

But while that was *an* answer to her question, it was not *his* answer.

“Then what will happen to the world when the orbs are destroyed?” Tinasha pressed.

Would things go on turning without Eleterria? Or…?

No answer came.

Tinasha stared at Valt.

His eyes were filled with both all-knowing insight and silent resolve. She had seen that look on the battlefield before, and she understood what it meant.

The scales were perennially out of balance, with only the most cherished things in all the world weighed against one another.

It was certainly arrogant to believe one person could save everything.

But would choosing the things on one side of the scale over the other lead to strength? Was it possible to change without sacrifice?

Tinasha gazed evenly at the man before her. His eyes shone with the bright light of one who no longer had a choice.

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Valt watched her with bated breath.

He didn’t think Tinasha should know this. But he did want to tell her. Perhaps she would understand him then. If this version of Tinasha were the queen he had served, he might have revealed everything.

But if he did, Miralys would learn the truth, too, as their senses were linked at the moment. And she could never know. It would shake her terribly. She would tear down the spell, which would mean defeat.

Valt and Miralys had first met a long, long time ago. Back then, Valt had already relived his own life many times. He was the latest in a long, unbroken line of heirs. While wandering, tired of enduring his own distorted existence, he rescued a grievously wounded girl in a forest. He shared some of his blood with her, using magic.

After that, the girl, who had no family and no ties, joined him. She was a bit of an odd one, only showing fondness for him. When had he started loving her?

They’d lived together, and, when she came of age, they had a simple wedding. It was a happy life.

She remained ignorant about how events occasionally rewound. Their shared life shone so brightly that it was enough to make up for the repeats.

However, Valt had no intention of ever having children. He couldn’t bear the thought of creating any more tools for the artifact to consume.

Valt did not despair when he died in an accident five years after they were married, nor when he was returned to her side because someone changed the past with the orb. He only wept when he learned, from the list of heirs etched onto his mind, that Miralys inherited the title of Time-Reader after his demise. He grilled her once he knew, but as Miralys was not heir while he yet lived, she had no memory of previous timelines.

Valt regretted his carelessness. For the first time in all his lives, he wanted to redo the past.

When, by sheer coincidence, he was returned to a time before he met her, he was even grateful to whoever had made that happen. He was careful when he rescued her again not to give her his blood or let her come along with him. Thinking he'd spared her his fate, he continued on, relieved.

But then he learned that despair was not so easily cured.

No matter how many times Valt repeated it—giving her blood or not, running into her or avoiding her—the end result was the same.

Her name was already engraved onto the records as an heir, and the curse passed to her.

Surely it had occurred to Valt's ancestors to end the suffering by not having children. He realized that the reason the line had gone on unbroken nonetheless had to be because of some fearsome compelling force that would not allow for such things.

And his hopelessness did not end there.

Miralys had become the one last straw the world was waiting for.

"There are no heirs after me," Valt stated.

In reality, the heir after him was Miralys. That was already set in stone and could not be changed.

Tinasha arched an eyebrow. "How can that be? According to you, there are still thirty-one more years until the world comes to a standstill. Won't the next heir just inherit this fate after you die?"

"There isn't one. I know the names of all heirs, past and future. My soul will be dismantled before it picks out the next one."

Unbearable pain lanced through Valt as he made that statement. He thought of all the losses he'd endured repeatedly.

Tinasha's eyes narrowed like she was analyzing magic. "Your soul will be *dismantled*? Does Eleterria do that, too?"

"No. In my first life, I didn't have enough magic, and I resorted to a forbidden curse. I traded my soul for power."

That was just a hypothesis. Valt could only guess what would befall Miralys when she inherited the Time-Reader position and its magic. However, her soul had indeed been splintered for some mysterious reason.

And that had drawn the world's attention.

"The heir's soul is treated as a part of Eleterria. When my soul was dismantled, it created a gap in the succession line. Then someone used Eleterria to go back in time, and the world decided that this gap could be used to get rid of the troublesome artifact. No matter how drastic the changes to history, it would all get added to that one fixed point of repair. With every rewinding of time, my soul fractured and was dismantled again."

"What…? You mean you used more forbidden curses?"

"No, it happened for a different reason with every instance. Once I was attacked by a demonic spirit; once I got dragged into someone else's spell.

The worst time was when a force of nature that sucks up mages' souls came to the city where I was living and killed hundreds."

Irityrdia's attack left the most devastation in its wake. Valt covered one hand with another to stop them both from trembling. "Initially, it only occurred every five lifetimes. But each rewinding of time increased the frequency. No matter how I tried to avoid it, something would inevitably happen to dismantle my soul, because that would create a gap in the succession line. That may be related to how the timeline can't continue forward past a certain point."

It sounded like Eleterria and the world were engaged in a tug-of-war.

One was rewriting the world over and over, while the other was attempting a revolution.

"I have nowhere to go from here. My soul won't blend back into the world, either. It will only keep getting damaged by Eleterria and dismantled by the world."

From the world's point of view, the death of a single human was a microscopic moment that was easy to set as a fixed point.

Her body, which lacked a soul, was always warm.

He remembered every bit of that heat, never forgetting. He had believed that this would be the time he would save her, and the only difference would be whether he lost her first or died first.

"Sealing Eleterria won't save my soul. And eventually, it will select some nonhereditary new heir instead. That's why it's much better if this ends here, with me."

Miralys stood at the edge of waters teeming with the fusion of rewriting and repairs. Valt had to get her out of there. He didn't care what it would cost. If not even going back in time would change it, then his only option was to destroy the orbs.

For the moment, Miralys didn't know she was to be the next heir. She thought Valt was the last.

She believed him and had come this far to save him. Which was why…

"There was a girl living in that house with you, wasn't there?" said Tinasha, her voice clear and ringing. Her dark gaze appeared to see right through him. "Is she the one you truly wish to save?"

Tinasha studied Valt's reaction carefully. He looked more shocked than she had ever seen him. Never had the man's desires been laid so bare. Tinasha was careful not to let him pick up on her own anguish.

If Valt truly was the final Time-Reader, he would not be able to proclaim with such conviction that while he would know if there were any heirs to come after him, none existed.

He knew that there was one after him. The last heir was that girl.

Her soul, too, had been dismantled. She, too, stood at a deadlock in history…

Thus, Valt's mind was decided.

All the blood drained from his face, but he remained silent. Evidently, he didn't want to answer.

Tinasha took some deep breaths. She kept her voice calm and steady. "I understand what it is you wish for, as well as the state of our world and what Eleterria has done to it."

"Well…good. Then you'll break it for me. You know I'm not going to back down. You're the only one who can save Tuldarr," Valt said, eyes shining as coldly and emotionlessly as they had before.

The many hostages denied Tinasha the luxury of choice.

However, she had sensed from her conversation with Valt that the present was at a crossroads, with no options left.

Should Eleterria be destroyed and the world restored to its original form…

Wouldn't history start over from that blank space in time thousands of years in the past when the two orbs were introduced?

"And that would mean…?"

How close was the present world to its natural state? Wouldn't negating all of the changes mean that Tuldarr would fall to ruin anyway?

And not only that, without Eleterria's changes, Oscar's fate would differ as well, since his mother saved his life. All of those rescued because of another's wish while holding one of the orbs would be erased.

Tinasha stood frozen. As if he could read her thoughts, Valt remarked, "Take a chance on it. Maybe your country and your husband will remain, and history will go on as it has, even after Eleterria is no more. But if you fail to make a choice here, Tuldarr *will* fall."

"I know…that."

She couldn't abandon her citizens, the ones alive right now, to die. Not without putting up a fight.

Tuldarr was her beloved motherland. That was as true four centuries ago as it was today. It was a country like any other, where people worked from dawn to dusk, laughed with their families, made merry at the occasional festival, and grew old in peace.

Gazing out at the city's lights from the castle was lovely. She saw human life as a beautiful thing.

Tinasha had believed she would happily spend her whole life protecting theirs.

And yet every choice facing her seemed to lead to a dead end.

They were all so heavy.

If the weight of them meant allowing others to live, she would bear that burden without question. However, that wasn't what was at stake now. Tinasha was so beset with doubts that she wanted to take a knee from the weight of them.

Two little boxes lay open on the pedestal, one containing a red orb, and the other, a blue one.

Eleterria, an instrument of hope and despair, absorbed human emotions.

How much would people's fates change if she destroyed it?

With trembling fingers, Tinasha reached out.

No sooner had she done so than a man roared from outside, "TINASHA!"

Relief and remorse swept over her.

That voice belonged to her one and only beloved.

With Tinasha about to crumple, Valt tutted in irritation and acted swiftly. He shoved one Eleterria orb into his pocket and seized the remaining one. With his free hand, he grabbed Tinasha and cried, "Let's go!"

They couldn't exit the treasure vault. Even Tinasha would need an incantation to teleport out of it, allowing Oscar enough time to capture Valt.

Valt set off at a run, dragging Tinasha deeper into the vault and kicking open a door. He burst into a dark stone passageway. A moment later, candelabra on the walls lit up.

"Run. Do as I say."

Tinasha nodded. They hurried down the dimly lit passage, casting defensive barriers to guard against traps. Tinasha bit her lip as she heard the sound of footsteps pounding after them.

She'd wanted him to come but also wished he hadn't.

Her country had been taken hostage, and she was in the midst of making an impossible decision, and now he'd gotten involved. Her delaying had dragged him into this mess.

"Oscar…"

The two mages weren't especially quick. They couldn't keep tripping over their feet while running for much longer.

For one thing, there was no way out. Tinasha didn't know about the secret path back into the castle. Only the Lake of Silence awaited them.

"Oh!" she gasped, recalling the lake's connection to Farsas legend. The idea had crossed her mind when she was trying to decide where to put Eleterria.

It would be difficult to pull off now, but not impossible.

She concentrated on the person behind her.

Trusting in the man who would undoubtedly catch up before long, she kept running.

After tumbling down the passageway, Valt was struck dumb upon arriving at a large body of water. Discovering an underground lake beneath the castle was quite unexpected. He hadn't thought their escape would be easy, but he'd counted on the flight buying some time.

A short distance away, there was a path that crossed the water, but Valt hesitated to take it. It would leave them extremely visible.

Instead, he threw a glance at his prisoner. "Cast a teleportation spell. Now!"

"That's enough," said a commanding voice before Tinasha could answer. Oscar stepped out of the passageway, Akashia in hand.

The king smiled as he looked at his fiancée and the intruder clutching her wrist. He had all the majesty of a monarch who could bring all who

beheld him under his sway. “You’re going to pay for dragging her around. Come here, Tinasha.”

“She won’t. She can’t disobey me,” Valt responded, forcing a smile onto his face despite the cold sweat pouring down his back.

Valt had served Oscar once, but only for three years. Yet in that short time, Oscar had imprinted himself as king into the man’s subconscious. This made it difficult for Valt to manipulate Oscar as he did other people. Instinctively, he shrank back.

He wasn’t very good at dealing with Oscar and never wanted to face him. There could be no admitting as much, however.

Wrapping an arm around Tinasha, he dragged her a step back with him. One more step, and they’d land in the lake.

The smile dropped off Oscar’s face, and he took a step forward. A royal sense of pressure, enough to change the atmosphere around them, rolled off Oscar in waves and crashed into Valt. “Hand her over. Eleterria, too. I won’t let you change things.”

“You’re the one who overwrote the past! It’s your fault that we’ve had to suffer all over again!”

“Well, I’m sorry about that. But it’s all over now. We’re going to seal away those orbs and not let anyone touch them again.”

“No. You don’t know anything.”

“You haven’t explained anything. Of course I don’t.”

“You are capable of putting your country ahead of the people you hold dear! That’s why I have no choice but to keep betraying you!” Valt shouted.

Once upon a time, the king requested that Valt talk with him before indulging in treachery, but there was no way he could. Valt knew what the answer would be. Even Oscar, who prized his wife above himself, would still choose his citizens. Oscar might understand Valt’s feelings, but he would never endorse them. Valt couldn’t ask a man like that to cooperate.

As long as Eleterria existed, Miralys's soul would fracture. There could be no yielding here.

"Valt," called an anxious voice in his head. It was the girl he wanted to shelter from everything. His one and only. If he could free her, it didn't matter if he ceased to exist and she forgot all about his love as if it never was.

"Valt…! Run…!"

"It's all right. I can still do it."

He couldn't back down. Dying with his mission incomplete was unacceptable. Fighting was the only recourse. He could rise above despair.

"Please, come back."

She was seeking confirmation. Pleading.

Never had Valt doubted her love for him.

Still, he trusted she could love another if he didn't exist, if they had never met.

And that would be fine.

It was better that way.

Valt tightened his grip on Eleterria as he stared Oscar down.

He would handle this battle alone, atop a sense of disquiet no one else would comprehend.

The girl continued to call to him.

"Are you listening to me? It's pointless saving me if you just end up disappearing. I would choose unhappiness and knowing you over happiness and never knowing you. Even if our time together is limited. That's what it is to be human. So please, come back to me."

"Miralys…"

Valt was breathless.

She must have caught on during his conversation with Tinasha. Miralys knew that she was the last heir…and that Valt would disappear along with Eleterria if it were destroyed.

Knowing everything, aware of what she would suffer, she still chose him. That was the type of person Miralys was. Her strength was so familiar to him.

Valt wanted to cry, to seek refuge in that power of hers. A desire to let her tranquil love compensate for all his repeated lifetimes rose within him.

Yet Valt held his ground. He couldn't see the future, which meant he couldn't give up.

He listened with growing frustration as Oscar and Tinasha spoke to each other. Just as he was about to urge his captive to teleport them away, something knocked into him and sent him reeling.

"Don't kill him!"

A gigantic *splash* echoed in the cavern of the dark, subterranean lake. Held behind Valt, Tinasha gazed past her captor to Oscar. Fury was plain on his face.

No mage could take him on at this range. If either of them cast a teleportation spell, he would be on them instantly.

While Valt held Tinasha hostage, there was no avenue for his escape.

Tinasha glanced up at Valt's tense, tight face. The imprint of a round orb shone through one of his pockets.

She looked back to Oscar. Valt had to know that Tuldarr was no compelling hostage to Oscar, which meant that he was stuck, just as Tinasha was.

But Oscar wasn't. He would fight Valt with no hesitation at all, despite Tuldarr's fate being on the line. That was the sort of person he was. Tuldarr wasn't his country. He would make the choice he had to, even if Tinasha resented him for it. His fortitude was entirely unbreakable.

That made him the only one she could rely on, the only one who could shake them out of this stalemate.

Tinasha sucked in a deep breath.

She could trust him. There was no one else but him. His eyes, the color of a bright twilight sky, were fixed right on her.

"Why does something like this happen the *second* I take my eyes off you?" Oscar sighed.

"I'm sorry," Tinasha responded.

"It's fine. We'll figure this out," he said. The steady response was characteristic of her husband.

The two of them were to be husband and wife; that was a milestone they were meant to reach on their long and winding journey.

No matter who they were up against or what sort of situation it was, they would overcome it, just as they had so far.

Oscar adjusted his grip on Akashia. "I know you're in the midst of a situation, but don't get reckless. Or do anything you don't have to."

"Despite how things look, I'm always considering what would be the quickest way out."

"Yeah, and I'm telling you that's unnecessary."

"I can do it because I have you," Tinasha replied. Her deep trust in him was more than she had even in herself.

The two of them had each other. Surely it was a stroke of fortune, enabling them to take on this intersection of their many layered destinies.

Tinasha gave Oscar a smile like moonlight.

"So Oscar, come and save me."

A hand shot forward and plucked the Eleterria orb from Valt's pocket, quick as can be. Then Tinasha rammed herself into her captor and used the recoil to leap backward. From the corner of her eye, she could make out a look of astonishment on Oscar's face.

"Don't kill him!" she shouted to Oscar before diving into the lake, the blue orb still in her hand.

A loud *splash* rose with white foam. The cold of the water hit her like a shock.

I know Oscar can stop Valt.

A little smile materialized on Tinasha's lips as she peered at the water's surface growing farther away.

What a task to leave to someone else. Was it all right to dump it in his lap?

Regardless, he'd allow it. This one time, Tinasha would sit back and let him take the lead.

If anyone should shoulder the blame, it ought to be her, not Oscar.

Tinasha wouldn't let that happen, though. No one would be lost today. She'd return to Tuldarr and undo that spell at any cost.

Then she would face Valt again and attempt to extricate the souls from Eleterria.

Oscar would almost certainly call her naive for such an attempt, but that was his standpoint talking. If Valt and Miralys were trapped, wedged in the middle of the war between the world and the alterations, Tinasha would see to their safety first. Then she would talk to him again and consider what to do about Eleterria and the world.

For now, she need only survive to reach that point.

Tinasha focused her mind. The lake water dispersed her magic. However, its ability to do so was weaker than Akashia's. She hadn't imbibed any of the water, enabling her to push past its effects by enhancing the pressure of her power. That was how she averted danger the last time.

As quickly as able, Tinasha cast an incredibly dense spell.

Once the teleportation spell was complete…she suddenly realized that the blue orb felt warm. Despite the chill of the cold water, the half of Eleterria in her grip was giving off heat. And it felt like all the water in the lake was quietly urging her to clench it tighter.

Something's wrong.

Her movements slowed. Her spell dissipated.

Tinasha was sinking, caught in a trap and dissolving as she held this little burning sphere.

Losing track of her very place in the world, she no longer knew what was happening.

A crack appeared on the orb's surface. Tinasha stared at it numbly. Before her eyes, it widened, and lake water flowed into the fissure. The sigils carved onto it glowed white, almost defiantly.

It began to activate.

Frantically, Tinasha poured magic into her hands to stop the orb from triggering, but the light intensified.

I want to go back to him.

That wish flashed through her mind. She could tell she was about to lose everything.

She was so close. She was about to be his bride. The promise *he* made her when she was a girl would come true.

With each new component of her wedding ensemble, Tinasha had savored the pure excitement. It didn't seem real that the time had really come for her to wear the veil her parents gave her; she'd thought it something that had long passed her by.

Even the wait for her days with him to start was joyful.

Oscar had given her something that transcended four hundred years. Once she wed him, she could die happy that very night.

And yet now…

A blinding light engulfed Tinasha, blotting out her vision. The hand holding the orb disappeared.

Her body, mind, and magic were all dismantled.

As was her heart.

I want to…go back—

With that final thought, her memory cut off and vanished.

7. Fate’s Compensation

“Awaken.”

That whisper made the girl look up. She couldn’t see a thing around her. There was only cold, watery darkness, and she was crouched in the middle of it. Her dark eyes scanned the surroundings.

There was no indication of what she’d been doing.

She didn’t know who she was.

She was all alone.

A formless voice spoke to her.

“Where is it you want to go back to?”

She wanted to return to a distant place. But where?

“The moment you choose, the world will form anew.”

The voice’s words were lost on her, for she was only a thirteen-year-old lost in the dark.

She’d been detained here to choose another path.

“Out of all your infinite memories of your lives, choose the safest time for you.”

The safest?

“Or the happiest.”

The happiest?

“Go on, choose.”

Choose. She only had one option. To go to him, to where he was.

To whatever the closest place to him was, to a time when she had fallen asleep at ease.

There was no cause for wavering or hesitation.

Standing up straight, she picked up the orbs at her feet.

“Run. Go.”

She sprinted away. A light glowed where she had chosen. There, the world was being formed.

She didn’t look back at the darkness. Her young body became an adult’s.

For the world that was taking shape, she ran.

“This time, it is your soul that will have new records etched onto it.”

She was no longer listening to the voice. Entranced, she dashed for the place and time where she wished to be.

“Give it as many tries as you like. You humans will keep trying, over and over.”

She ran. The darkness of the lake water faded.

With every bound, the world reformed and recreated itself.

“Try. Keep trying until you get to the ending you want.”

Then she leaped into the blinding white radiance.

If I didn't exist, you'd find someone else to love. No one is irreplaceable; birth or death is insignificant.

It's simply that a person loves another person. They love everything about them, feel grateful that they could meet them, and feel like that person saved them. That moment in time is like a miracle, a flash of emotion like lightning in the sky.

I will discover the meaning of that moment.

※

Tinasha sat up with a gasp. She was in a dark, unfamiliar room. The window showed it was night outside; no lamp or candle lit the room. There was only the pale bluish light of the moon.

As she attempted to calm her panting, gasping breaths, she gazed down at herself—and froze. She wasn't wearing anything. Instinctively, she hugged her knees and head to her chest, curling into a ball.

"Why…?"

"What is it?" asked a man beside her. She nearly jumped out of her skin at his question. Lying on his stomach, he lifted his head to look at her. His eyes were as blue as the sky right after dusk.

She knew him, yet his name wasn't coming to her right away. Why couldn't she recall it? They were clearly close enough to share a bed. That made Tinasha realize she didn't even know her own name.

While that left her aghast and stupefied, she had to get it together. Pulling up the blankets to cover herself, she inquired, "Who are you, and who am I, and where are we…?"

The inquiry prompted the man to give her the strangest look. He sat up, leaned back against the pillows, and then answered, "I wondered why you woke up so randomly. Are you still half-asleep? I'm your husband, the king of Farsas. You're my queen, a witch, and the heir to Old Tuldarr. We're in the royal bedchamber of the castle. Do you need me to tell you our names, too?"

"Oh!"

That was enough to jog her mind and fill in the blanks.

She was born four centuries before and became a witch on the eve of her country's destruction. Her name was Tinasha.

After many twists and forks in the road, she became his wife. Tinasha had no idea how she could have forgotten such a thing, even if she had trouble with waking up.

"Sorry… I guess I *was* half-asleep."

"Sure seemed like it. It's the middle of the night," Oscar said with a little grin. That smile filled Tinasha with such fond familiarity that she felt instantly at ease. All the tension drained from her body. He reached out to ruffle her hair, and she blushed.

“It was like…I had a dream of a time that wasn’t this one…and it felt like it took a really, really long time to get here,” she muttered.

“A dream of the past, maybe? You *have* lived twenty times longer than I have,” Oscar remarked with a smirk.

Then his eyes softened. “You’ve worked hard.” The warmth of his sympathy for the centuries his wife had lived was her reward for those long years of loneliness. He wanted to spend the rest of his life giving her warmth and love.

Tinasha savored a feeling of happiness before she joked, “I certainly don’t *feel* twenty times more mature than you.”

“Yeah, you peaked a long time ago, considering how short-tempered and socially awkward you are. I don’t mind, though.”

“Stop treating me like a little kid!” she protested, although she was grinning.

After living for eons and choosing to separate herself from other humans, she had concluded that she was an anomaly.

Such was the nature of a witch, and she was the strongest, though still shackled by deep feelings for her homeland.

Yet despite how warped she was, he never denied her identity as a witch, nor did he give up any part of himself to do it. He simply invited her to stand next to him.

Ever since she met him, she had enjoyed the most fulfilling time of her whole life. That was why she’d elected to live the rest of her days as his loving wife and as a force he kept in check.

“I’m very happy right now. I’m glad I finally found you,” she said. This was the most joyful and safest place. She had no worries or anxieties. All she needed was for this to go on forever.

Tinasha gave him a bright smile. But Oscar frowned at the sight of it. “What’s wrong?”

“What? Nothing,” Tinasha replied, but then she realized her vision was blurring. “Huh?”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. Maybe she’d awoken from that dream so suddenly that her emotions were still out of whack.

I have the strangest sense that I’m a young girl in love, somewhere in time. I’m thinking about wanting to wear a wedding dress.

What would be making her feel that way? Tinasha had already married Oscar. She met him not as a naive little girl, not as an ice queen, but as a witch with four hundred years of ennui behind her.

Curiously, she still felt a twinge of incongruity. It was as though her longing for the dream lingered within her like the traces of a fragrance.

Over the blankets, Tinasha pressed a hand to her chest. “I don’t know. I feel as if…I didn’t get to marry you. That’s the sense I’m getting.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Oscar questioned, not with exasperation but with genuine concern. And it was no wonder. There were too many discrepancies in this reality. Tinasha’s memories were getting all muddled.

Something that should be there had vanished…

Tinasha swallowed whatever was swirling within her. “I’m…fine.”

“I hope so. Don’t stay up any longer. Just go back to sleep. You’ll make it even harder for yourself come morning,” he said softly, reaching out to wrap both arms around her waist and draw her in.

“He-hey!” Tinasha yelped reflexively, but she couldn’t do anything to stop it. As the confused woman was pulled back into place next to him, the sensation of her skin sliding directly against Oscar’s made her feel distinctly uncomfortable. Automatically, Tinasha tried to crawl out of his arms. “This is too—”

Her behavior made Oscar frown. “What is it? Why are you moving away?”

“I—I mean, that felt really weird, okay?! I’ve never done that before!”

“You’re funny…”

Oscar sighed, rubbing at his temples. She flailed in an attempt to break free, but she was no match for the king’s toned arms, which held her fast.

“Looks like you’re still asleep. Guess I should do something to wake you up,” Oscar whispered, dipping his head to place a kiss along her nape.

She screeched like a cat. “Wait! I said wait! Something’s not right!”

“You’re acting weird. What’s up with you?”

“Let’s just talk! Let me go!”

“Not yet,” Oscar refused, pinning Tinasha down as she squirmed beneath him. Even she wasn’t certain why it felt wrong. There was simply a definite feeling of abnormality.

As Tinasha thrashed around, one of her feet knocked against a cold, hard object of some kind that had no place in a bed. She frowned. “Wait, there’s something here.”

“Something as in what, exactly?” Oscar asked, lifting his head. She scrambled out from under him and fumbled around under the sheets for it. Then her hand closed around it. “Here it is.”

The pair of them gazed down at a blue jewel etched with sigils along its surface.

Something deep in her memory whispered, *I know what this is.*

“Ah!” she cried as waves and waves of memories abruptly flooded her mind. The sheer volume of so many chronicles and lifetimes lived repeatedly was enough to send her reeling.

In some, she never became a witch and perished along with her country. While in others, she died as a young child. There were a few where she perished after becoming a witch.

A few lifetimes came and went without her ever meeting Oscar. A couple she spent alone.

In so many, she died before ever having the chance for atonement. Others had her perishing from a sudden danger that arose once everything was over.

That she could wind up in his arms at all after her fate had changed so many times was nothing short of a miracle, the end point of an indescribable series of events.

This memory was like a dream, which was why she felt so happy and loved here. So much so that she would choose to return to this point from any other in time and space.

Tinasha buried her face in her hands and abruptly broke into muffled sobs, leaving Oscar flummoxed. He wrapped his arms around her soft form. Using a finger to tip her chin up, he gazed into her dark eyes. “What is it? What happened?”

“Oscar…”

Slowly, Tinasha blinked. Her eyes were wet with pearly tears. She took a shuddery breath and then gave him a melancholy smile. “I’ve traveled such a very long way… Will you listen to me?”

The beseeching expression she turned on him was beautiful. It had been a long time since he’d seen her with that look, and it had been equally as long since he’d watched her cry.

Oscar dropped a soft kiss onto her lips. “Yes. Tell me.”

So Tinasha launched into the full story of Eleterria and the history that no longer existed.

※

After hearing everything, Oscar let out a long, hard sigh. “That’s quite a tale. I don’t believe a word of it.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t,” Tinasha said with a pained look as she glanced over at the Eleterria orb on the bedside table.

It was the blue one, which should have been locked tight within the Tuldarr treasure vault in the normal flow of events.

“Tuldarr, huh? I would’ve liked to see it,” Oscar remarked nonchalantly, making Tinasha’s heart ache. The people who loved and protected her motherland were all gone. In this world, that country had fallen to ruin four centuries before.

In lifetime after countless lifetime, there was only one in which Tuldarr survived. But that instance was already lost to the sands of time; nothing of it remained. A half-cracked Eleterria had deemed it a dead end and initiated a rewind.

“In the end, I couldn’t…save Tuldarr,” Tinasha murmured, pressing her palms against her closed eyelids. Her regret turned to tears; Legis’s last smile surfaced in her memory.

Tuldarr was like some illusory phantom, a country she had possibly dreamed up at some point. But it was no fantasy. Despite the fact that it didn’t exist now and that the alterations in time had erased it, that nation and the people who’d lived in it were there. She would be the only one to recall the beauty of the city lights and the days she’d experienced.

Had the people of Tuldarr been truly happy? It was useless to answer that; it would make for a poor consolation.

“There is no world where everyone is happy.”

So Valt had said. Had he been correct?

The world kept spinning as tragedy and salvation intertwined like a pair of lovers. It was impossible to rescue everything. Someone would always be screaming with grief at any given moment. Tinasha had survived with her country once, and now she was left alone again.

Her eyelashes stirred. With his thumb, Oscar gently wiped away the tears from her cheeks. “Was it a good country?”

“Yes… Very much so.”

Tinasha would need a little more time to process the blow of losing her country a second time.

Through Tinasha’s story, Oscar had learned about Eleterria. After a bit of hesitation, she also revealed the full truth of his mother’s death, which he listened to with astonishment. Then he let out a little sigh, not seeming mixed-up over it in the slightest. “To be honest, sometimes I would see this silhouette flash through my mind, one I’d never glimpsed before. I guess that was…a remnant of the memories that got sealed away. Did you know all along that I was related to a witch?”

“More or less, yes. I recognized her magic in you… I’m sorry I didn’t say anything sooner.”

“It’s fine. You were being considerate,” he said, mussing Tinasha’s hair. As she watched him, she cast back through her memories.

This feels strange.

She wasn’t her current self, the one who was a witch. Some other, weaker—and yet very determined—self was alive within her mind. Since the day Oscar’s actions had changed history and the timeline diverged, she had lived a total of seven years. While that was a drop in the bucket for a witch, it was agony for Tinasha, the Queen of Tuldarr.

And at the end of it, here she was, her current self.

Oscar gazed into his wife’s teary eyes. “So you have these recollections that should have been erased, which means…”

“Yes. I’m the new Time-Reader heir.”

At this point, there was no Valt or Miralys. In the normal flow of time, the role of heir went unfilled. Yet instead of them, she had become the Time-Reader after touching Eleterria.

“So you remember every life you’ve ever experienced? That must make it feel like you’ve existed forever,” Oscar remarked.

“Yes, I need to keep some degree of control over it, or things will get rough,” she replied.

Mental fatigue had occasionally overwhelmed Tinasha after living for only four hundred years. Now she had the memories of the infinite existences she’d led before. Staring at her own memories would grow unbearable.

There was also something else to consider. The Time-Reader was generally a hereditary title. Any child she birthed would eventually become the next heir.

“I was selected as heir under quite unusual circumstances. Eleterria was partially broken in the lake water when it took apart the world and reformed it to escape. I was the closest, so it made me the heir, took my memories and existence as the anchoring point, and reformed the world.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that this world was created the moment I woke up,” Tinasha stated. Oscar gaped at her, which was understandable, as he possessed no awareness of having awoken only a short while before. This timeline was one Eleterria had selected out of innumerable overwritten pasts, then had reconstructed from scratch. None of that appeared immediately plausible, but as the Time-Reader, Tinasha knew it was true.

As Oscar mulled over her story, a pensive look came over his face, and he stroked his chin. “Gotcha. So it was almost broken and pulled an emergency evacuation. Did you try to destroy it in the water?”

“I couldn’t. That lake water has the same properties as Akashia. I can just barely use my magic if I pressurize it, but only for simple spells. A powerful, high-output attack would be out of the question.”

“The Lake of Silence, huh? Who knew there was something like that underneath the castle.”

“That timeline was the only one where it was excavated. Travis seemed to know about it, but maybe that was because he heard about the excavation. I can probably teleport us there if you want to see it.”

“Hmm… No, I’m good. I feel like I’ve got a general idea already,” Oscar replied, sounding like he’d accepted the crazy story. He patted Tinasha’s head.

“What idea?” Tinasha questioned, cocking her head to the side. Reclined on the bed with her cheek resting on one hand, she resembled nothing so much as a curious cat.

Oscar kissed her forehead. “Those outsiders’ artifacts or whatever have powers that defy the laws of magic, right? But even before you knew about them, you’d already encountered something else that works in mysterious ways.”

“I had?”

Tinasha had no idea what Oscar could be referring to. She had lived a very long time and had seen many things, but only a few of those were things Oscar could be aware of.

As Tinasha fell into deep, serious consideration, Oscar flashed her a chagrined look. “Come on. You don’t need to think so hard. I’m talking about Akashia.”

“Oh!”

He’d meant the royal sword, the only blade in all the land capable of nullifying magic. It was prodigiously effective, but no one knew how it

functioned. The sword had been passed down since the founding days of Farsas without ever getting lost to the ages.

“The legend says an inhuman creature pulled Akashia out of the Lake of Silence. So wouldn’t it make sense if whoever that was came from outside our world? Didn’t Travis call the Lake of Silence the insiders’ lake?”

“O-Oh yes, he did…”

Travis had said, “While she was an outsider, she also wasn’t. She chose to be an ally to humans and lived and died among them.”

What if the person he met was the very one who’d pulled Akashia from the water?

“The first queen of Farsas…Deirdre?” Tinasha wondered.

“The name of the first queen was never recorded.”

“I heard it directly from a member of the Farsas royal family four hundred years ago, though not until after I became queen. She traded her own power for the sword and gave it to the first king. But in exchange, she could no longer return to her birthplace. So the story goes.”

If the inhuman creature who pulled the sword from the lake was the same person as the first queen, it explained why Travis was surprised that Oscar didn’t know about the existence of outsiders’ artifacts. Travis believed the Farsas royal family would have passed on the truth about the first queen and the royal sword.

“Then does that mean I have outsider blood in my veins?” Oscar posited.

“It happened twenty generations ago. It would be very diluted by now,” Tinasha replied. Examining Oscar magically also revealed that he had no inhuman qualities. Farsas was founded seven centuries in the past.

Tinasha gazed up at Oscar, impressed with his deduction skills. “But wow, so that’s what it was! I’m so accustomed to how unusual Akashia is that it didn’t occur to me at all.”

“Yeah, you’re pretty used to the sword because of how much trouble it gives you. But that does seem to explain why the Eleterria orb cracked inside the lake.”

“Yes, it does…”

The outside observers and the one outsider who’d mingled with humans and married one.

Deirdre, who chose the human world, left just enough power to eliminate the artifacts her kin introduced. Now Tinasha knew she hadn’t imagined the water rushing for the orb.

“So Eleterria escaped from the Lake of Silence,” she mused.

That timeline was scrapped because the Lake of Silence had been excavated.

To capture a Tinasha who wasn’t a witch, a Time-Reader heir broke into the treasure vault, which resulted in the creation of an underground labyrinth. A series of new events had driven Eleterria to desperation.

“When…I first considered where to hide Eleterria, I thought of submerging it in the Lake of Silence because almost no one would go near it,” Tinasha recalled.

“If you’d done that, this would’ve all happened sooner,” Oscar pointed out.

Tinasha let out her umpteenth sigh of the night.

Had Valt known this would transpire, he might have chosen another method. Or perhaps he would’ve reached out to Tinasha anyway?

Valt Hogniss Gaz Kronos.

He was a second-generation Time-Reader and Tinasha’s former subject. Tinasha knew his full name because it was inscribed on the records she had access to as the latest heir. His thoughts and desires during his many lives would forever go unknown, however. For he’d never revealed the full truth to Tinasha.

Huddled in the bedsheets, the witch exhaled. “This is all so bizarre. I can understand why Valt was trying to destroy the orbs. There have been far too many rewindings of time in this era.”

“So the orbs have passed from person to person over the years, huh? Is our current timeline one step ahead of the one that disappeared?”

“To be more accurate, it’s exceedingly close to it.”

This instance—the one that would have gone on had Oscar not traveled back four hundred years—had been recreated with Tinasha as the anchor. However, as it was a thing remade, there were likely to be some discrepancies.

“I chose this timeline,” she told him.

“You did?”

“Yes. A person’s wish is required for Eleterria to activate. When it asked me where it should rebuild the world, I chose this moment… Because in all of my memories, I am the happiest right here and now.”

She had wished to return to him. She was most content with him, so she’d woken up here.

Oscar broke into a grin when he heard that. “I’m honored.”

“When you met me when I was a young girl, you promised that if I could meet you four hundred years from then, you’d make me happy. And you were right.”

“Yeah?” Oscar asked as his hand brushed over her cheek. Tinasha stared at the reflection of herself in his eyes.

Oscar carried no recollections of his previous lifetimes. But now, something had settled between them—eternity. The weight of all the time accumulated within her and the breadth of the love he poured into her made this place where both intertwined eternally.

Yet she could not stay here forever. Tinasha could not allow the Farsas royal family to become Time-Reader heirs. She would attempt to detach the heir’s soul from Eleterria; if that failed, Oscar would have to take another consort.

Tinasha had no choice but to stop her physical body's growth again, which would allow her to live as long as possible as the sole Time-Reader. That way, the artifact wouldn't take a new prisoner.

Oscar might object to her stepping down as the queen consort, but she intended to stay in the castle until he died.

And with as many memories as she had, she could live off them forever.

Lost in thought, Tinasha cast her eyes down. However, she looked up again after noticing Oscar's gaze. A bittersweet smile decorated his face as he stared at her. "Tinasha."

"Yes?" she replied, waiting for him to go on.

He leaned in and pressed a kiss to her eyelid. Then he stood from the bed and began to dress. "Let's go. Put some clothes on."

"What? Go where?"

"There's another one, isn't there? In the treasure vault. Bring that one, too, but be careful," Oscar instructed, pointing at the blue Eleterria orb as he grabbed Akashia.

From behind, he looked masculine and powerful. The way he never hesitated was beautiful. Reflecting on how his actions spoke to his unshakable will, Tinasha nodded, despite her doubts.

While the guards outside the treasure vault were bewildered to find the king and queen visiting it in the middle of the night, they bowed and made way.

After refusing an escort, the pair entered the vault. Tinasha found the little box right away. "This is it."

"Hmm."

After Tinasha cleared away the other jumble of objects on the pedestal, she placed the two Eleterria orbs side by side on it.

Red and blue.

The same patterns on both made a complementary pair.

Oscar cocked his head to one side as he eyed them. "You have to destroy them both at the same time?"

"Yes… But wait, you want to destroy them?!"

"Of course," he responded matter-of-factly.

"What?!" she cried, her jaw dropping.

Her flabbergasted look made Oscar give her a look of chagrin. "I understand your point. The point made by the version of you who argued with Valt. I don't know what you're thinking now, but if you still want to save people, even if it means altering the past…and if you're prepared to have that affect your life…then I want to honor that and destroy it."

"Oscar…"

Eleterria had reshaped events over and over. Those were all, undoubtedly, challenges to destiny. In the shadows of history, people had challenged fate ceaselessly.

This would be the final confrontation—destroying Eleterria and restoring all of the altered destinies to what they should truly be.

If that counted as yet another change, it would be the biggest yet.

The mother who was first given Eleterria would not be able to save her child, and the Time-Reader family would vanish.

Valt wouldn't be born, and he wouldn't meet Miralys.

Not only that, the lives and destinies of many people alive now would be modified, such as how Oscar's was when his mother rescued him from a demon attack.

"You…," Tinasha began, but couldn't go on.

Does he understand that he might die? The witch gazed into Oscar's blue eyes searchingly, and he flashed her a little grin.

"I can say that because Eleterria saved me, and I've used it to save another. Even so, changing the past is honestly a backward-looking way of doing things. No matter how much you regret something, you have to live with it. We shouldn't…be able to do anything for what's behind us." He stroked her hair. "Besides, wouldn't it make us more careless in the present moment if we knew we could go back to fix things?"

It sounded like he was chastising a small child, and Tinasha smiled sorrowfully.

Oscar was right, but it was only because he was so strong that he could make such a declaration.

How many human emotions and revisions had gone into this world? The littlest feeling distorted history, and that deformity spread until it became the next foundation.

It was wrong. Tinasha knew that. However, she wasn't sure if she could dismiss it, for it was so very human.

Oscar was different, though. "If you're ready, we can end it here. I don't know who these outsiders are, but it gives me the creeps to think of them taking advantage of human regrets and amusing themselves. I've had enough of getting watched and documented."

If Oscar had been given the option to travel to the past, he would've refused. He'd only saved Tinasha because he was already there—because he was strong. Oscar was the kind of person who could get on his feet and start moving, regardless of where he was.

"Whatever kind of tragedy this is, we should rise above it. I believe that all humans have the power to do that," he declared.

After a long silence, Tinasha nodded. Oscar's dignity was the sanctity of human life.

This world wasn't a miniature garden, and its people weren't toys.

Tinasha would reject any observers and their aims. She would not allow fate to be manipulated. She recalled the pride given to her when she was born alone in the world and when she achieved independence as a separate individual.

Oscar watched his wife. Abruptly, tears filled her dark eyes. His heart ached to see it, but he didn't let his emotions show, as that would only wound her further.

She gave him a lonely smile. “It always surprises me how decisive you can be.”

“Yeah? I think this is the only natural conclusion.”

“For you, yes.”

Tinasha wrapped her arms around him, and he hugged her back tightly.

If outside laws induced the alternation and reformation of the world, then it would reach its limit someday, given that each instance carried a significant burden. History had come to an impasse. What would happen beyond that? Everything might collapse. That meant someone had to ease the weight before the implosion. Akashia must have been passed through generations for just such a purpose.

Oscar stroked Tinasha’s hair gently. “Besides, if we don’t destroy it, then I know you’ll go back to saying you won’t have my baby. And I don’t want that.”

“I never mentioned anything like that,” Tinasha protested, grinning through tears.

Forget a baby—it was improbable that Oscar and Tinasha would ever meet at all.

Eleterria had been introduced into the world in a blank space in time more than a thousand years before this moment. Everything would be redone from scratch, starting from that distant point. The two of them may not even be born. Even if they were, they could die before reaching adulthood. Oscar was only alive because his mother had used Eleterria to rescue him. In the true flow of history, he’d perished.

Allowing any of that to show through his expression would rob Tinasha of the will to go through with this. All Oscar could do was smile at her like it meant nothing. The bit of deception helped ensure she carried no regrets.

Oscar whispered to her, “It’s all right. You don’t need to bear it all alone.”

If they didn’t get rid of Eleterria, she would remain the heir, seal it away, and try to live a long life.

But that wouldn’t fix the problem. She would be bound to Eleterria as Valt was.

So they would end it here, staking everything on a timeline whose fate was unknown. That’s what humans did.

Oscar heard Tinasha heave a deep sigh. “You really do see through my every thought.”

She looked up at him as a smile like a moonlit flower bloomed on her face. He held her tighter.

“Oscar… If history changes and everything goes back to how it was, even if no one remembers and I’m never born, I’ll still love you. You are my first. My last. My only.”

She swore that to him emphatically, her words filled with conviction. The depth of her feelings for him bled into her voice.

She was a rare find. He was lucky to have known her.

Loving her and receiving that same love in kind had been a miracle. It was worth trading his life for.

"That's more than I deserve to hear. I feel the same way—I love you."

Oscar was touched that Tinasha had chosen to come to him from myriad memories. Now that he knew what a mess the world's history was, he was overjoyed that she still loved him.

Even if their world had only just been created, Tinasha carried memories of a life with him. Those were worth something, even if it all disappeared.

Those recollections were sure to support the decision she was about to make.

Oscar caressed his beloved wife's cheek. A tear rolled past her long eyelashes and fell over his thumb.

If at all possible, I want her to have another happy life.

It didn't matter if they never met, as long as a life free of the torment of loneliness and hardship awaited her.

But if by some chance he did get the opportunity to gaze upon that azure tower again, he would go forth without the slightest hesitation to meet her. Then he would be near her again, even if he bothered her initially, and they could eventually share a life together…

It was a silly dream that would never come to pass.

But for right now, Oscar wanted to believe in that happy idea.

Tinasha was trembling minutely, and he whispered to her, "Don't worry. I have no intention of letting you go. This is just a waypoint for us. Don't hesitate. Whether you're queen of another nation or a witch doesn't matter to me. Just come to me. And if you don't, I'll barge in on you again."

"I can picture it," she replied with a grin, one that was beautiful through the tears.

Oscar hugged Tinasha close. He could hear her sniffling into his chest. But soon enough, she bit her lip, and her tears stopped. Stretching up on her tiptoes, she wound her arms around his neck and pressed herself to him.

"You are my king. I have loved you for an eternity. Everything in me—my power and my mind—exists to protect you."

The blessing Tinasha gave Oscar was utterly steadfast. That was how strongly she felt about him. He knew that the strength of her love had saved him in return.

The witch loved fiercely, intensely, and awkwardly.

He could never doubt her devotion to her people and husband. It was because she was with him that he could go forward.

As Oscar savored the feel of Tinasha's body heat seeping into him, he listened to her make an unwavering vow.

"Please wait for me. I promise I will come to you. I will cross time. And then we will love each other again."

"I…look forward to it," he replied with a broad smile. The world was about to change as they dreamed of such a modest little vision.

After Oscar patted her on the back, Tinasha released him. They gazed into each other's eyes, pressing their foreheads together.

Dark eyes and twilight eyes reflected one another's forms.

As their noses, cheeks, and, finally, lips brushed against each other's, they shared a last kiss.

Their destinies had undoubtedly intertwined when they were not originally supposed to. That was why things had to end here.

To attempt to change things, as humans did.

Tinasha took hold of Oscar's left hand. With a nod, he unsheathed Akashia.

He turned to face the pair of artifacts that glittered with all of the human emotions they had absorbed.

"Was it fun toying with us? Don't you dare look down on humans. Your days of amusement are over."

The double-edged sword glittered like a mirror as Oscar lifted it aloft and gave his decree with a ringing tone.

"We reject your interference. You shall turn to dust and leave us be!"

Akashia came down. The blade touched both of the orbs at once.

A white light consumed everything.

Immediately after the clear tinkling of the orbs' rupture, terrible pain stabbed through her body.

"TINASHA!"

Oscar instantly gathered his wife into his arms.

The power to dismantle the world swirled in the air, whipping into a mad vortex.

It was impossible to see anything, and she didn't know what was happening.

The shards of Eleterria, attempting to absorb what they could, and the power of Akashia, following them in hot pursuit, were transforming her soul.

A force brought in from outside this world was pouring into her, enough to change her into something inhuman.

"AAAAAAAAAHHHH!" she screamed.

Oscar held her tight as everything turned white and burned away.

Then they were thrown into an unknown place.

END OF *UNNAMED MEMORY* ACT TWO

Intermission A Lost Fragment

Clasping the young child’s body to her, the woman wept.

The child was cold and lifeless.

Dead. Lost, irrevocably.

She sobbed for this life that could never be recovered. No price seemed too steep if it could mean the little one’s return. Her baby was irreplaceable to her.

But it wouldn’t work. She knew that. Time couldn’t rewind.

That knowledge was of little comfort and did not give her reason to wish otherwise.

“Someone, please… Save my baby…”

Her wails echoed through the world.

No one answered her plea. No one was there.

Her quavering, interminable sobs only filled up her little corner of the world.

8. The Gray Room

“I wish I could have watched you all a little longer,” someone said, and Oscar came to.

Evidently, he’d lost consciousness for a moment. It felt like he’d been sitting in this little gray room talking to an unfamiliar young man forever.

He didn’t recognize the other occupant, who was sitting at the empty table with him. Oscar sank back into a soft chair. His wife’s head lay in his lap; she was asleep and breathing peacefully, legs curled under her on the ground. Locks of her long hair swept gracefully across the floor of the chamber.

Calmly, though with obvious regret, the man admitted, “I wanted to save you humans. Isn’t it sad when a mother loses her child? I wanted to let her do things over. That’s all. I hoped to give all of you a chance to overwrite whatever mournful or cruel thing occurred, if that was what you wished to do.”

“Even if it drove our world to the brink of destruction? Sometimes you save one thing only to give rise to another tragedy entirely.”

“I thought that you humans would do something about it, should that come to pass. I only meant to expand your options and permit you to make repeated attempts, however many times you needed.”

“We didn’t need that. We’ll handle things on our own.”

Their back-and-forth had gone on for ages now. It felt like the same conversation had repeated for a very long time, but also like it had only just begun. All in the small windowless room was gray, like an endlessly rainy day.

Tinasha’s rhythmic breathing was the only sound.

The man cracked a sliver of a pained smile. “You don’t need it? I thought you might say that. But our power already permeates the two of you. Now you can remember all of the lifetimes you’ve lived before, too, can’t you? There’s the proof. You’re just like the humans linked to that tool, but much more powerful. When you die, your souls will not dissolve back into the world as other humans’ souls do. You will keep drifting as foreign objects, divorced from your humanity.”

“Foreign objects?”

When he destroyed Eleterria, two forces—the artifact’s power and Akashia’s—poured into Oscar and Tinasha. A transformation capable of changing the world had filled the pair.

No ordinary ending was possible for them. It was Oscar’s responsibility that such an unprecedented end had come and that Tinasha had gotten wrapped up in this.

However, he knew that Tinasha would smile and say, “I’m glad we’re in it together.” That brought him both comfort and pain.

“If it all gets too unbearable, we’ll figure something out. I know she will, at the very least,” Oscar replied. As long as he had Akashia, he could at least free *her*.

But the man tilted his head at Oscar quizzically. “Are you truly all right with that? You might wind up alone for eternity.”

“I’m fine. I’ve already received so much.”

Tinasha had showered him with love over the course of many, many lifetimes. It was plenty.

“Why have you interfered in our world?” Oscar questioned.

“Because it’s our role to make contact with you and accumulate knowledge. Although, all of us have different reasons. I do it because I’m interested in you. I would have liked to watch you for as long as possible… But the woman who made your sword told me I was being arrogant.”

“Rightly so.”

“Meddling in others’ affairs is an arrogant act, no matter how you go about it,” the man stated, his voice dripping with undisguised self-loathing.

He was one of the observers from outside the world, the creator of Eleterria. The man in the room was a fragment of consciousness contained within the artifact. No—left here, purposely. It appeared he’d been awaiting a visit.

“Don’t you care that your tool’s been destroyed?” Oscar asked.

“It’s merely the result of you humans trying things out. And besides, nothing’s settled yet.”

“Because there are still other artifacts?” Oscar sighed, getting to his feet. He picked up Tinasha, still asleep, cradling her to his chest.

A little door appeared on a gray wall. As Oscar headed for it, the man’s voice stopped him. “Going back already? The world is waiting for you two. You’ve finally appeared—beings who can battle against our devices. It won’t let you go until all of them are gone.”

“I don’t care.”

Had he feared that, Oscar wouldn’t have destroyed Eleterria. If he’d desired to spend eternity dozing in a little room, he would have picked a peaceful life with her from the start.

So even if this was only the beginning, he had to accept it. This place was the waypoint that allowed them to reunite, after all.

Oscar heard the man offer, “Then go on and give it a try. Keep trying.”

He opened the door and stepped out into nothing.

“The world and I will give you the transformation you need to keep fighting.”

The original world would rise anew from a blank space where nothing had even begun.

And then…?

9. Where the Story Goes

Somewhere in a city not far from a forest near the national border, a boy sat with his chin in his hands and a bored look on his face in the dining room of a little inn. Sulking, he muttered, “Ugh, I wanted to go to the castle city. I wanted to see the Festival of Aetea.”

“Is it the three hundred and forty-second Festival of Aetea this year? Yes, that’s too bad,” a woman sitting at the same table as the innkeeper’s son responded with a smile. She’d been a guest of the tavern for two days now. The black-haired woman sipped at her water as she listened to him.

The boy went on. “They took me last year and everything, too. Have you ever been, miss?”

“I have. I’ve even lived in the castle city.”

“Aww, I’m so jealous… I wanna live there when I’m older,” said the boy.

His mother in the kitchen overheard him and shouted back, “Don’t be ridiculous!”

Automatically, the boy flinched.

The woman broke into peals of laughter. Once she was done, she grinned. “Instead of the festival, how about I tell you a very old, very fascinating story?”

“What kind of old story?”

“It’s an ancient legend passed down in Farsas about a king and a witch.”

The boy stared at the woman’s red lips, which were stretched in a beautiful smile. Though he gaped at her for a moment, he took the bait right away. “Do witches really exist? I thought they were a myth.”

“They did, a long time ago, though no one knows where they are now.”

“What? No way that’s true. How does the story go?”

The woman’s expression turned bewitching. And with a melodious tone, she recited the tale.

“Once upon a time, in the land to the west of Farsas, there stood an azure tower just beyond the border. The spire was filled with traps and monsters, and a witch lived on the top floor. Those who made it past all her trials and climbed to the top would be granted a wish. However, none had succeeded at the challenge in dozens of years.”

“Wow. Is the tower still there?”

“Not anymore. It was old and dangerous. Anyway, a prince of Farsas became interested in the tower and climbed it alone, though it was very foolish of him. But he was powerful and made it to the top floor, where he met the witch…”

Such fairy tales were commonplace, yet the boy’s eyes sparkled as he pressed the woman to continue.

She closed her eyes and smiled as she launched into the next part.

“First, he asked to duel the witch to test his strength.”

“Wow! Who won?”

“The witch beat him handily, of course. She flattened him into a pancake.”

“Yikes…”

That was an unexpected twist. The boy had been expecting a traditional tale of valor, and he hung his head in disappointment.

The woman giggled and waved a hand comfortingly as she went on. “The prince was strong nonetheless, so for his wish, he requested that the witch train him. Reluctantly, the witch accepted. Before long, he became as strong as the witch. By the time the prince was king…the witch had fallen in love with him.”

“What?! Are you joking?!”

“I’m very serious. Then the witch moved out of the tower and married him. The Farsas royal family carries their blood to this day.”

“I—I don’t believe that. I mean, she’s a witch! Wasn’t she all wrinkly?” the boy objected, which made the woman burst out laughing.

“You should ask your history teacher,” she advised. “This story is fairly well-known.”

“It *is*? Okay, then I’ll ask tomorrow.”

The woman nodded and took a sip from her glass. Her unique eyes, the color of darkness, caught the light of the candles and sparkled.

Then a voice boomed from the doorway to the dining room, “Tinasha! What are you doing playing around? It’s time to go.”

“Oh, right. Sorry,” answered the woman, tying her long black hair back in a ponytail as she stood and headed to join her companion at the door.

While she looked to be around twenty, her male companion appeared sixteen or seventeen. He was a handsome young man with deep brown hair and eyes the color of bright twilight. Tall and dressed in traveler’s garb, he carried a longsword at his waist, and a little red dragon was perched on his shoulder.

His features were fine indeed, though they lacked the slightest hint of adolescence. For someone so young, he spoke with an oddly grown-up tone of voice and possessed a dignity beyond his years. Despite resembling a teenager, he already seemed a mature young man. His behavior and attitude betrayed that he was quite a capable fighter and that he was of high lineage.

The people of the inn had believed at first that he and the beautiful black-haired woman were brother and sister, but they didn't look alike at all, and there was a strange magnetism between them.

The young man set down an amount of money that covered their lodging fees and then some. "Thanks for the hospitality."

The inn proprietress came out from the kitchen and bowed to her departing guests.

Her son did the same. "See you, miss. Thanks for the story." He waved as he watched the woman follow her companion and depart.

The proprietress narrowed her eyes, puzzling. "That sword… Never mind, it couldn't be. I saw the king carrying it just last year."

"What? I wanna see the king, too!" her son whined.

"Next year, dear. Next year," she placated before returning to the kitchen.

Dusk had arrived, and the sun was sinking into the horizon. As the clear blue sky transformed into night, a pale azure moon rose in the sky. Gazing up at it, the boy huffed out a sulky sigh.

The pair left the inn and made their way outside the town. Lights began to shine from the windows of village homes, and the woman admired the view. The man grinned at her. "That was quite the tale you told back there."

"You heard that?! It isn't nice to eavesdrop, you know!"

"Lots of stuff happened after we got married, too. Don't cut the story off so soon."

"All of that is recorded for posterity in the castle archives. Old fairy tales don't need to be completely accurate," she responded with a giggle.

He gave her a fond look before he remembered something else. "Who did you say flattened who into a pancake again?"

"Ow, ow, ow!"

"I'll flatten you right now!" he growled, pressing fists against her temples.

"I went too far! I'm sorry!" she cried, begging for mercy. Once he released her, she rubbed at her head, teary-eyed.

He stuck his tongue out at her. "Well, I suppose it's the truth. But I wouldn't lose now."

"I look forward to finding out," she replied with a grin.

"I'm ready whenever you are," he returned, nodding in satisfaction. But as he glanced down at himself, an annoyed look stole across his handsome features. "It's just hard to use a body that's not fully grown yet. Yeah, it's nice that we can be reborn when the world commands it or whatever, but it's a hassle right now."

Their souls could not dissolve back into the world, even upon death. Such was the gift bequeathed to them by the world, to use them after their transformation into foreign entities. After they perished, it would only take a few decades before they obtained new bodies. They would search for

babies that had lost their souls before birth, and they would take their forms to be reborn.

Ahead of them was a war with no end in sight.

To erase all outside interference in the world, they tracked down outsiders' artifacts and destroyed them. These two were the weapons of that fight.

Such a long journey would likely take them beyond the mainland. They would cross the sea, move into new time periods, and keep trying.

No one could say how long it would take to end. But that was the task the world had assigned them. The pair were artifacts in the shape of people, crafted from transformed souls.

Someday, their truly eternal destiny might become unbearable.

Each time one witnessed the death of the other, the grief and loss might wear away at their psyche a little more.

But they were perfectly happy for the moment, because neither was alone.

The woman explained matter-of-factly, "Our physical bodies appear to be designed to stop growing naturally at the age when we are most fit for battle. Essentially, we're young forever. Although if it bothers you, I can use magic to age you up a little."

"It's fine. I'll only have to bear with it for a few more years."

At that, the woman happily latched on to his arm. "I like seeing you at this age. It's fresh and new, which makes it fun."

"If you enjoy it, then I suppose it's worthwhile."

"I'd like to see you even littler, too. I'm sure you were adorable. Oh, but don't die on me anymore. I was so lonely waiting for you…"

A shadow abruptly passed over her dark eyes. She tightened her hold on his arm, seeming anxious.

To reassure her, the man smiled. "Understood. I'll be careful. In exchange, you're not allowed to go out on solo missions. You always get some mortal injury or another right away."

"What's a bit of an injury if I still win?"

"I don't know if I would consider 'riddled with holes all over your body to be *a bit* of an injury," he responded dryly, sounding entirely unamused.

She gazed up at him raptly. In a voice as clear as a bell, she said, "No matter if it takes decades or centuries for you to come back, I *will* find you. I'll track you down even if you don't have your memories. We'll fall in love all over again."

She spoke of pure and everlasting love.

An affection that would surpass eternity, as it had once already.

That feeling was enough to carry them through the ever-changing times.

It sounded like a wedding vow. The man broke into a broad grin. "I'm very glad to hear that. Oh, but I should tell you that you're *extremely* bad at winning a man's heart. You come on way too strong. If I don't remember you and you're all over me, it's going to be a bit of a turnoff."

“Hey! Don’t you think that’s a little rude?! I could say the same thing about *you*!”

“I watch and wait before making my move, adjusting my approach as I go.”

“I don’t see the difference!” she whined.

Then her mouth pursed into a decided pout. “I think it’s fine either way. We have all the time in the world, after all. I can wait for you to come around, even if it takes a hundred years.”

“That’s *exactly* the sort of creepy behavior I’m talking about.” The man sighed. Despite his admonishments, the two of them would never see eye to eye on this. It was pointless to hope she would use a more roundabout approach, but that was also proof of how deep her feelings for him ran.

Despite his grimace, he finally cut to the chase. “I heard a rumor that something that could be an outsiders’ artifact is in some lord’s domain in the north.”

“I hope it’s true. That would make our fifth one, if so.”

“Let’s take it easy as we investigate. Once we’re done, we can go see the ocean or something. It’s been a while.”

“As you wish,” she replied, and the pair departed from town.

Night fell swiftly around them while the man commanded the dragon to change its size. The pair boarded the dragon’s back and soared into the air.

Down below, the lights of the city after dark were a sea of glittering gems.

The woman smiled at the twinkling ocean, the flickers of human life. The man wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

Then this entirely uncommon pair vanished into the night on a dragon’s back.

The story of the king and the fifth witch faded into the annals of history as an ancient fairy tale.

Eventually, no one remained who could recall their names.

All the stories in the world gave rise to others, stacked in libraries to be read over and over.

But they would never be overwritten again.

So it went, a fragment of an unnamed memory.

-END-

Afterword

I am Kuji Furumiya. Thank you very much for purchasing the final volume of *Unnamed Memory*! The story of a year in the life of the king and the witch comes to a close here. I'd be very happy to hear if it left you wishing you'd seen more of them.

Their world encompasses five main continents. For thousands of years after the events of this story, a mysterious man and woman pass in and out of history across those land masses. *Unnamed Memory* goes into who and what they are, while *Babel*—which takes place three hundred years later—offers glimpses of the traces they left behind.

The eons they spent fighting amid cycles of death and rebirth stretched on and on for a very long time, and they lived in peace for some of those days…until everything came to a definite end.

However, that is revealed as part of another story centered around other protagonists in the distant future. I hope we all receive the opportunity to meet them again someday.

Onward to my messages of thanks!

Thank you so much to my editors, who always go through such struggles! It's thanks to both of you that this series could finally reach its end. I'm sorry each volume has been so massive. I look forward to your guidance in the future as well!

And to chibi, who provided such gorgeous illustrations through the sixth volume, thank you! It's all because of chibi's artistic prowess that my two protagonists and the world they live in are brought to life so vividly. The color illustration at the start of this volume is particularly moving for me.

Also, I must express my heartfelt gratitude to Tappei Nagatsuki, who wrote an endorsement blurb for the first volume, commentary notes for the third volume, and an addendum for this sixth volume. It was selfish of me to request that we get him to write something for the final book, but he indulged me despite his busy schedule and produced a heartrending piece that touched me deeply. Thank you so much!

Finally, I'd like to thank all of you readers who have followed this journey to the end with me.

Because of you, I was able to finish my story, which I had originally planned to end after three volumes. Somehow, thirteen years have passed since I published it online, but that's allowed me to add lots and lots of content. I do hope you enjoyed everything.

I've been given the opportunity to write about my two protagonists as they track down artifacts now that history is no longer being overwritten, and the occasionally fragmentary incidents they experience. In addition to that sequel, there's also a manga adaptation of this series to look forward to. Let's meet again there!

For now, please savor the end of this unnamed tale. Thank you so very much!

Kuji Furumiya

Tappei Nagatsuki’s Thoughts on the Conclusion

Hello, world, this is what Kuji Furumiya is all about!

I do apologize for starting off that way, but I wanted to loop back around to everything I hinted at in the commentary notes I wrote for Volume 3.

I’ll admit that I can’t resist the urge to illuminate all the foreshadowing I did back then, now that I’ve been asked to write something to commemorate the final volume of *Unnamed Memory*, a series that is among the best of the best in terms of the beauty of its storytelling.

Here in the final volume of *Unnamed Memory*, I’ll give my unvarnished opinion as someone who has read the entire story.

Oh, it’s really over…?

As I read through the draft of the final volume, I turned each page with joy and despair in my heart. Delighting in every bit of banter between Tinasha and Oscar, I reached the last page and read *THE END*.

All of us who have read this story, whether you knew about it from its online serialization days or heard about it after the print edition started, surely felt the same emotion upon reaching the conclusion.

Namely: We’re all so glad that Tinasha and Oscar were there with us.

I know that I don’t need to go into detail about the twists and turns and hardships experienced by our protagonist pair to you, a reader who’s been along for the ride. There was the rewinding of time at the end of Act One, a plot twist that left every reader gobsmacked. The plot of Act Two reconstructed every single interpersonal relationship between the characters. Finally, the conclusion to the story that all of us readers devoured greedily is a finale that probably cannot be called a happy ending. But no matter what trials and tribulations await, Tinasha and Oscar will overcome them.

I am fully confident that readers who have followed their trajectory thus far across the many events depicted in this sweeping tale known as *Unnamed Memory* have seen enough proof to be sure of that.

Although I have had the honor of writing an endorsement blurb for Volume 1, commentary notes for Volume 3, and this short essay for Volume 6, please know that I am but a humble fan of this series.

If I have anything at all to say, it is a sincere thank you to Ms. Furumiya and to everyone who has loved this series for over a decade and made the print editions possible.

I believe that for humans, the discovery of a good book is one of the finest and most irreplaceable treasures in life. However, it’s possible that the slightest misalignment of gears could mean that we never come across a story that would change our lives.

Fortunately, this tale was crafted, lived within people’s hearts, and ultimately became something that I could encounter.

I don’t wish to spoil the afterglow for readers who have just finished the final volume, so I am keeping my thoughts brief. However, I encourage you to send your impressions and reactions directly to Ms. Furumiya. Literary authors are simple creatures, and to us, reader feedback is like water that makes new flowers burst into bloom.

We want you to share your joy with us so that we can bring forth new stories that you can discover and that will enchant you.

As the first one to verbalize my gratitude and passion for Ms. Furumiya’s story, I have set the ball rolling. I put down my pen hoping that the rest of her readers will follow suit.

Finally, I wish Tinasha and Oscar everlasting happiness.

And to my beloved Lucrezia, I can only wish that you are eternally happy as well.

Extra
The Song Heard Round the Tower

A trial run repeated ceaselessly. A miniature garden toyed with mercilessly.

Destinies on intertwining trajectories that are recorded and observed. Peeped at and admired.

But that is a tale from a bygone time—a lost story.

What begins now is a tale of the first and last meeting of two deviants expelled from the wheel of destiny.

※

That year, the castle city of Farsas was seized with fear.

Children went missing in a series of mysterious kidnappings.

Despite royal investigations, security patrols, and parental vigilance, kids kept disappearing.

There was no evidence to follow. The case took a ghastly turn when everyone was at a complete loss.

The five-year-old crown prince vanished from his bedroom in the castle.

“I’m going to go see my mother! I’ll do whatever it takes to get her to help—”

“But Rosalia, she only allowed you to marry me on the condition that she never provide any sort of aid to us in the future.”

“So you’re telling me to keep quiet and do nothing, then?! A *demon* has kidnapped our son!” the queen shrilled, clutching a bright-blue bird feather. Previously, no clues had been left behind after a child was abducted, but a feather was found under the prince’s bed this time.

All the mages concurred that it belonged to a demon. The queen, a mage herself, agreed with them.

The king gazed in anguish at the feather the queen was waving in his face. Then he recalled something.

He remembered the woman who, fifty years prior, had accompanied his grandfather.

※

“Master, we have challengers.”

“I see, I see. How rare. I wonder how far they’ll get?”

“They seem to be here on urgent business. I heard them talking about something that had happened to a child.”

“Hmm?”

The azure tower was home to a witch who granted wishes to those who climbed the spire. On rare occasions, she listened to the requests of those who failed her challenge, too. There was no exact rule. It all depended on whether the wish of the person risking death to challenge the tower moved the witch’s heart or not.

She would allow those wishes in exchange for total silence on the matter. Her power was immense.

The Witch of the Azure Moon, the strongest in all the land, cocked her head innocently in curiosity and set down the book she was reading on a table before her. A moment later, she vanished.

※

True to the stories his grandfather had told, the tower’s trials were intense.

By the third level, half of the officers he’d brought with him were down. Kevin observed the marked exhaustion on the faces of the remaining members of his group and grew more nervous.

But that didn’t mean he was giving up. He would reach the top of the tower. Only there could he die.

As he was rallying himself to face off against a lion that must be some sort of magical creature, he noticed a girl appear behind the lion and frowned.

“Is that…?”

She had porcelain skin and long, jet-black hair. Her dark eyes were so striking as to be utterly unforgettable after one look at them. A fine, high nose stood beneath beautifully shaped eyebrows and long lashes. The red petals of her lips were lovelier than a masterwork painting.

After peering around at the group, she stepped up and gave a light rap on the lion’s head. It fell to the ground instantly.

Paying no attention at all to the stunned looks on the faces of all in the party, she glanced over at Kevin. Her eyes grew wide. “Oh! Is that Akashia? What business does the king of Farsas have here?”

While Kevin wondered what exactly this person meant by her artless question, it hit him. This girl bore a striking resemblance to the witch his grandfather had told him about.

“Are you the Witch of the Azure Moon?” he asked.

“I am. If you’re here with an urgent matter, I’ll listen to what you have to say. But if you’re not, I’ll let you get on with it.”

“No, I am! I need you to save my son. He’s been abducted by a demon!”

“A demon?” the witch repeated with a suspicious frown.

Kevin held out the blue feather he had brought. She eyed it coldly. “When was he abducted?”

“Last night.”

“It may be too late, then.”

“I don’t care! I won’t give up hope if there’s a sliver of a chance!”

“Then will you pay with your own life?” she asked indifferently.

The king paled. But without even thinking about it for a second, he nodded. “I am prepared for that. Please, I beg of you.”

After letting out a little sigh, she snapped her fingers. The feather teleported from the king’s grasp into hers. “You are foolish. Think about your position. If your son is dead and you die, too, what’s going to happen to your country?”

Her criticism was scathing. But Kevin only gave a bittersweet smile. “Should that happen, I trust my younger brother to handle it.”

He still hadn’t faltered once. The witch stared at him with disdain. But then she floated up into the air and, quite abruptly, vanished.

Had she agreed to his plea? While the group was still puzzling over that, a teleportation portal sucked all of them up and deposited them outside the tower. Those who came to their senses first made a mad dash back to the tower, but there was no longer a door there—or any sign that there had ever been a door.

※

“A child-abducting demon, hmm? I suppose even mid-ranking demons have a modicum of intelligence.”

No demon had been caught yet, which pointed to a certain degree of craftiness. It likely wasn’t the effort of a single creature.

Still, one of them had managed to get past the palace wards, which meant they must have enough magic to slip through. Most mid-ranking demons were unbalanced, possessing either exceptional spellwork or magical ability, but not both.

As Tinasha floated high above Farsas castle city, she inhaled deeply.

Then she drew up an intricate spell in the blink of an eye and hurled it down below.

With the blue feather in hand, she watched and waited patiently for a reaction to her detection spell. Traces of magic emerged all over the city—proof enough of the demons’ mad, uncontrolled romp.

The strongest residue was coming from one location in the castle. Tinasha traced it and found that it led outside the city. The magic, trickling

out in a slightly westward path, was so faint that an ordinary mage wouldn't have noticed it.

"Hmm. Underground, I suppose," Tinasha muttered, teleporting there.

She found herself at the mouth of an ancient mine in some woods in western Farsas. Upon discovering a small cave, she entered it without hesitation.

She had been living holed up in her tower for so long that she wasn't familiar with the outside world. She tried to stay apprised of the bare minimum of current events, but only those she deemed newsworthy. More frequently than not, she wouldn't take notice of any small-scale wars that broke out or child-kidnapping sprees.

The only thing that overruled that policy was someone showing up on her doorstep.

"So this boy is Lavinia's grandson and Reg's great-grandson? Why come to me? I suppose I can guess."

While it did occur to her that the answer was she embodied the king's best chance, it had still required considerable gumption to show up at the tower of an infamous witch.

And once she heard that a child's life hung in the balance, she couldn't refuse.

Partway through the cramped cavern, Tinasha discovered a tunnel obscured by magical camouflage. She stepped into it and found herself in a passageway of finely hewn stone. These must be ruins of something. Tinasha glanced around at what appeared to be a dungeon of some kind. "Now, where should I start investigating?"

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?!" a woman shrieked with a grating, metallic voice.

Puzzled, Tinasha peered into the darkness and found a birdwoman advancing toward her from deeper in the passage. Brilliant blue plumage fanned across her head and arms. The woman's oblong eyes were distinctly avian. Nodding in satisfaction, Tinasha remarked, "Ah, so it was you. I've been looking for you. You've been stealing children in the Farsas castle city, haven't you?"

"Are you a mage?"

"You're half right," replied Tinasha, lifting an arm carelessly as a silver dagger materialized into her grasp. With the lightest flick of her wrist, she threw it at the demon.

The birdwoman's mouth curled scornfully, and she spread her wings to deflect the blade.

"That won't—"

But before the demon could finish, an enormous hole opened up in her breast. Blue feathers fluttered in the air. The demon collapsed, a look of shock on her face.

Tinasha eyed her coldly. “That’s what happens when you can’t tell when someone’s a witch. Although it’s not like you’d have gotten away even if you had.”

The witch plucked a drifting feather from the air. Then she strode off down the stone passageway.

The dim rock chamber was lit only by a candelabra on the walls, glowing weakly. It was pitch dark anywhere the flickering light couldn’t reach, symbolizing utter despair.

New children were brought into the room, and others were taken away. Even as young as they were, the kids understood what had happened to those who were gone. They huddled together as their own deaths drew ever nearer.

Footsteps approached from outside the chamber with a watery, squishy sound that was not at all human.

Someone was going to get taken again.

While the other children cowered, one wore a dauntless look. Dressed in his nightclothes, he was a new arrival, but he didn’t seem frightened at all. His highborn status was evident from how his cousin, who’d been kidnapped earlier, was startled to find him there.

The door opened, and a black-furred man poked his head in. “Who should I pick today? Teresa did say she wanted a girl.”

That made the three little girls in the room tremble. They backed away toward the stone wall in an attempt to get away even a little, their eyes squeezing shut against their tears. But their meager act of resistance was in vain, for the man entered and reached for the closest girl.

“Nnnnooooooooo!” she cried, letting out a shriek as she shivered uncontrollably.

Grinning, the man made to grab her but found his way blocked by a boy in nightclothes.

Though he had no weapon, the boy stood there armed with pride and anger alone and glared at the demon, who was taken aback.

“Stop it!” snapped the boy, his blue eyes blazing.

“O-Oscar,” protested a blond boy trying to stop him.

The man snorted. “Now this is funny. You two are royals, aren’t you? The type who’d die for your precious pride. I think I’ll take you up on your offer and pick you for today’s snack.”

The demon reached out for Oscar, who stood firm. Blocking the girl, he slapped the demon’s hand away with every drop of strength in his body. Predictably, rage filled the demon’s eyes. His voice grew lower and rougher. “I’ll rip you apart right here before I drag you out. A little bloodshed is all part of the fun.”

“What do you gain from eating me?” asked the boy.

“I get stronger. Eventually, I’ll become a high-ranking demon.”

“No, you won’t,” said a voice as cold as ice from behind the man, who whirled around. A young woman stood there, one who had approached so stealthily he hadn’t sensed her at all. She smirked up at him fearlessly.

The black-haired girl of sixteen or seventeen snapped her fingers. “High-ranking demons are conceptual entities, different from you in every way. No matter how powerful any of you grow, you’ll never become one.”

“Where…did you come from? Who are you?”

“None of you can tell who I am, which means you’re all complete nobodies,” she replied, making no secret of her scorn.

The man’s face twisted with fury. The nails of his right hand transformed into a curved blade. He took a step toward the girl, flashing it at her. “You’re a little older than Teresa wanted, but a girl is a girl. Looks like you’re the snack today.”

“Choosing based on age is only going to give you food poisoning. But enough of that. Is Teresa that birdwoman? If she is, she doesn’t need any more meals. Ever.”

“What does that mean?”

The young woman grinned. She pulled out her other hand from behind her back and sent a flurry of blue feathers fluttering to the ground. The man stared at the sight in shock. “Did you…? How dare you!”

“Come on. Now it’s your turn. Time to play,” the girl mocked sweetly, cajolingly. Her graceful fingers drew up a spell. When the man saw how intricate and powerful it was, he realized for the first time that he was up against something he couldn’t surpass.

He had no time to even think of a way to fight back. She didn’t allow him any.

Instantaneously, he scattered to pieces—though he didn’t leave a speck of dust behind. The black-haired girl watched it happen calmly.

Then she stepped into the rock chamber and smiled. “I’ve come on behalf of the king of Farsas.”

No one could believe it. A stir ran through the children, who were all on the brink of despair by that point.

The boy who had protected the little girl maintained his vigilance as he demanded, “Who are you? Have you really come to save us?”

“Who I am is a secret. Yes, I’m here to rescue you. Do you want to go home?” she asked with a smile. It didn’t seem like she was lying. The kids exchanged glances and then began to stand one after another, gathering around her.

“Miss, are you a mage?”

“I am. I’m going to open a portal to take you back to the city, so wait just a moment.”

“Are you from Farsas? You’re so pretty! I’ve never seen you before.”

“Do you work in the castle?”

The children began clamoring around her, pelting her with questions now that the danger had passed.

The young girl gave them a tense smile back, stooping down to their eye level. “I am not from Farsas, nor do I work in the castle. I’m here because I was asked to come.”

A blond boy caught hold of her hand. “Hey, will you marry me once I grow up?”

It was a childlike, innocent question, but the girl’s dark eyes sparkled mischievously. “As long as you’re all right with an age gap. But first, you have to be stronger than I am.”

She cast her spell, and a small portal opened on the wall.

“It’s time to go now. This is linked to the castle city in Farsas.”

With cheers, the children stampeded for the portal. One by one, they plunged into it.

She watched them go until only one remained. He turned back to look at her before he went. “Thanks… You saved us.”

“It was no trouble,” she replied, breaking off there to stare at him. Something like surprise came into her dark eyes.

For whatever reason, their color was terribly familiar to Oscar. It was like he’d seen that hue before, a long time ago. It was the oddest feeling of familiarity—a memory he couldn’t yet recall.

She must have been experiencing something similar. After gazing at the boy, she came back to herself and smiled. “Your father is a very impressive man.”

As she raked a hand through her black locks, she ducked in and pressed a kiss to the boy’s forehead. His eyes grew wide.

“You look a little like Reg. It really takes me back… Anyway, you need to get going,” she said, giving his shoulders a push. He nodded and stepped into the portal. As his surroundings transformed around him, he glanced back into the cavern chamber, but the girl was already gone. He stared at the empty room in shock.

That mysterious girl whose name he didn’t even know left a very strong impression on the boy.

Fifteen years passed.

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Tinasha poured tea into a cup. Fragrant steam wafted into the air. As she regarded it with a reasonable degree of satisfaction, she said to the person behind her, “Welcome. You are the very first person to ever reach the top of the tower alone. I’ve made some tea.”

The witch turned around. In the doorway stood an unfamiliar young man of about twenty. His well-toned physique spoke to someone with no weak spots. His handsome features offered glimpses of a domineering personality and gave an overall impression of masculinity.

In his eyes shone a color of the sky just after dusk. Tinasha cocked her head, feeling she had seen that exact hue somewhere before.

The young man didn’t seem like he planned to budge from the door. Tinasha held up her hands to show him they were empty. “I’m not going to do anything. Come in.”

He came back to himself, wincing sheepishly. Then, after a pause, he put a proper smile on his face. “It’s just…I thought you’d be more grown-up.”

“I’m still a witch. I’ve halted my body’s physical growth.”

“The last time I saw you, I was still a kid. I really thought you were an adult.”

“A kid?” she frowned.

The man showed her the sword he carried. “It was fifteen years ago. Don’t you remember?”

That blade was passed down through the Farsas royal family, a weapon entirely unique. As the witch beheld the mortal enemy of mages, realization dawned in her dark eyes.

Tinasha clapped her hands together. “Oh, from that one time! You’ve gotten so big. You’re not cute anymore.”

“I don’t think I’d be happy if I were cute at twenty like I was at five.”

“Wow, you’ve really grown up into quite the man. Your late father would be proud.”

“He’s still alive.”

“I’m sorry, that was a joke in poor taste.”

Grinning, the man sheathed his sword and strode into the room, right up to her.

“I am Oscar Lyeth Increatos Loz Farsas. Thank you for saving me back then. May I ask your name?”

“I’m Tinasha. It’s been a long time,” she greeted him, a smile bursting into bloom on her face.

Though she proclaimed herself to be a witch, she seemed no different from any other young, beautiful girl.

Keeping his impolite thoughts to himself, Oscar sat down across from her and accepted a cup of tea. They made pleasant, harmless conversation about the past and the tower.

But before that could go on for too long, she snapped her fingers and changed the subject. “So why are you here now as the first successful challenger in seventy years? Do you have something you want?”

The witch in the azure tower granted the wish of anyone who climbed it to the top. The last one to complete that achievement was Oscar’s great-grandfather, who had sealed away an enemy nation’s magic weapon with the witch’s help.

After staring intently at the witch seated across from him, Oscar replied, “Well, yes… But before that, could I ask you to go a round with me?”

“What? You mean a fight? Does that mean you’re here as the bearer of Akashia to vanquish a witch?”

“No, I’d never be so ungrateful. I only want to test my skills.”

“Er, I’d really hate to kill someone whose life I went to the trouble of saving many years ago,” Tinasha protested. She was that sure of herself. The idea of losing didn’t seem to be a possibility to her. She was, after all, the strongest of the five witches.

Oscar grimaced. “I’d prefer not to die.”

“Then you should give up on this. You’re as reckless as your father.”

Oscar knew that the witch told his father she would take his life in exchange for saving his son.

But in the end, she hadn’t, nor did she tamper with his memories. She’d only had her familiar toss the entire party out of the tower.

However, once Oscar was safely returned to the castle, a letter from an unknown sender was delivered to the king. Reading only, *Say nothing,* it was presumed to be the witch’s demand.

In response, the court announced that the missing children cases that had terrorized Farsas were the work of demons and that a mage unaffiliated with the castle had resolved the situation.

Tinasha could be nice, but she was still a witch.

Any normal person would have backed off upon hearing her say that, but Oscar only gave a strained smile. “Even if I die, I have a cousin. He was among the group that you saved.”

“Wooooooooooowww. Well…I suppose if you’re serious about this.” Tinasha stood and sighed. Spreading her arms wide, she cast a spell. As it activated, it teleported them to the first floor of the tower. She glanced behind her, and the door disappeared.

After taking a few steps back, Tinasha grinned. A narrow longsword appeared in her right hand, a dagger in her left. “I’ll be your opponent, then. Don’t even consider holding back. Come at me like you’re trying to kill me.”

That gracious proclamation was clearly imbued with all the majesty of a witch, not a young girl. Swallowing nervously, Oscar unsheathed Akashia.

They were about six paces apart. Oscar waited for his chance, gauging the distance between them.

He hadn’t expected her to whip out a sword of her own—let alone two of them. One or both must be magical weapons that carried mystical properties. He couldn’t even imagine what sort of skill she had.

But she didn’t seem to be as concerned as Oscar, cracking her neck and flexing her toes against the floor to ensure her stance. Though it was short, the white dress she wore didn’t seem suited for combat. She glanced down at the knee-length hem, and Oscar followed her gaze.

What beautiful, slim legs.

The moment her gaze dropped, Oscar lunged for her.

What happened next astonished him. Tinasha strode forward to meet him.

She parried Akashia’s first strike with her longsword and thrust her dagger at Oscar’s right arm. Immediately, he flicked the hilt of it away with

his elbow and then swung Akashia down swiftly and powerfully to parry the longsword as well.

Tinasha twisted her blade to dampen the power of the blow, but Oscar was too quick. Her beautiful face screwed up into a little scowl.

He got back into a fighting stance and immediately attempted a third thrust. However, the witch flung her dagger at him, delaying his attack.

Using his left hand to bat away the flying knife, Oscar brought Akashia down on her. But she was gone. He heard the sound of panting overhead.

"Ah!"

She had used magic to fly far above him. She did a light flip in the air. Her sword sparkled with azure lightning, which flashed as the crackling sword shot toward him.

The lightning seared his eyes; Oscar used Akashia to guard against it. After deflecting Tinasha's weapon, he found that the witch was no longer above him. Following his instincts, he whirled around and swept Akashia through the air.

Tinasha, who had alighted behind him and was about to swing her sword down on him, quickly ducked to dodge away. She cast a teleportation spell and returned to her original position.

As she tightened her grasp on both blades, she grumbled, "Ugh, I've gotten rusty. You're not bad. Stronger than I thought."

"Thanks," Oscar replied, calm on the outside, though he felt so nervous, his back was soaked with cold sweat.

Dual-wielding was atypical in and of itself. The way she mixed in magic on top of it made her tough to predict.

Oscar might win if it were a sword fight alone, but magic was the pith and marrow of a witch. Oscar had initially believed he could beat her as long as he kept her in close range, but now he was reconsidering what would be the best way to attack from here on out. All the while, Oscar maintained a close eye on the distance between them. He would just have to keep pressing forward, using his superior speed to prevent her from getting a chance to cast.

However, that might be difficult to do without killing her outright.

Frustration over things not playing out the way he'd thought they would welled up within him. Ultimately, none of it came to anything.

With a bright smile, Tinasha made the swords in her grip disappear. Then she extended her right hand. "I think I'll get a little more serious…and bring this to a conclusion."

In an instant, a gigantic spell filled the area.

Oscar couldn't see it, only able to sense that something in the air was different.

Magic amassed in the spell, and it burst into flame. All at once, it turned into a wave of red and surged toward Oscar. Despite his shock, Oscar held firm to Akashia and took a step in. He thought Akashia would nullify enough of the attack to carve an opening in the fire, enabling him to slip through.

But just before Akashia could touch the fire, the flames vanished.

"Huh?"

He had only a moment to wonder before he was aghast to realize he couldn't move a muscle. Looking over at the witch, he saw her grin and wave at him. Then she sent him flying into the tower wall.

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In his childhood memories, the witch was strong.

Powerful, mature, and…she seemed to be a little lonely, too.

Perhaps he thought that because she mentioned his great-grandfather, a man he'd never met.

Curious about her, especially since she had revealed she wasn't from Farsas, he hounded his father immediately upon returning to the castle until he learned the truth.

A tall tower in a barren wasteland. And apparently, she had lived at the top of it for centuries.

He wanted to see her, to thank her.

But only those who climbed the tower could do that. That meant he had to get stronger.

From that day forward, he threw himself into sword training with great intensity.

He studied both in the classroom and on the training fields, all so that he could see her again someday—to rescue her this time. He would stand beside her as a proper adult.

That way, perhaps he could ease some of her loneliness.

Such was the naive dream of a child.

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When Oscar came to, it was already dark outside.

Pale magic lights on the walls glowed in the dimly lit room.

When the witch, sitting at his bedside reading a book, noticed he was awake, she gave him a tight smile. "How are you feeling? All of your wounds should be healed."

He sat up and curled his hands into fists two or three times, but nothing felt wrong. "Looks like I'm fine. Thanks for doing that."

"You shouldn't have been so thoughtless. You need to decide *before* fighting whether you can beat an enemy or not."

"I wanted to know the difference in our strength. I was pretty confident, too, but…"

"Yes, I might have been in some real trouble there if the battle was limited to close-range combat. I made dinner. Would you like some?"

It threw him how she asked about dinner in the same breath as admitting her life might have been in peril, and he burst out laughing as he stood.

She stared up at him, bemused. “What? Did I hit you somewhere I shouldn’t have? You got hit all over, though.”

“No, I’m fine. I’ll take some dinner.”

“Coming right up. Oh, and decide on what you want for your wish.”

“I already have,” Oscar muttered as he watched the witch depart from the room with a fond look on his face.

“You’re more domestic than I expected you to be. The food’s good.”

“Well, I’ve been living alone for a very long time. That said, don’t compare it to the meals you get at the castle.”

An array of dishes Oscar had never seen before was laid out on the dining table. None of it was Farsasian cuisine.

Still, they all smelled delicious and tasted exquisite. The dishes had almost a gentle taste, like a meal cooked at home for a family somewhere. As he sipped at the glass of wine she had offered him, Oscar focused on his food for a while.

Once she finished eating, he broached the topic of his reward. “I’ve thought about my wish.”

“Have you decided what you want? I can’t grant *anything*, but go ahead and tell me.”

“I want you to train me until I’m strong enough to beat you.”

“You… You want *what*?”

“I want to win against you.”

That floored her. None of the other challengers had ever requested something like that before. Grimacing, she scratched at her temples. “Er, I don’t think I have *that* much of a death wish.”

“I don’t mean to kill you. I want to beat you in a match.”

“Why? Is this part of some grand adventure where you travel around to get stronger for combat? I think you’re already pretty capable.”

“But I lost, didn’t I?”

“I don’t think I could call myself a witch anymore if I lost to some twenty-year-old mortal with decent skills, even if he had Akashia,” she retorted dryly.

However, Oscar wouldn’t give up. “No one in the castle can beat me, but I want to get even better.”

“Are you planning to wage war against a witch or something?” she pressed, her cold eyes gazing past him to something else entirely.

He picked up on her meaning and shook his head. “Do you mean my grandmother? No, no. I’ve never even met her.”

“Really?” Tinasha asked, looking just the tiniest bit abashed.

Oscar nodded. He’d never been introduced to his grandmother, the Witch of Silence. His mother had cut off contact with her when she married

into Farsas. He didn't have any particular interest in meeting her, either, and naturally, he harbored no desire to defeat her.

His true wish was for something else.

Oscar gazed steadily into the witch's dark eyes. In a low, steady voice, he explained, "I want to have lots of choices. I don't want to feel like I could have made something happen if only I'd been stronger."

Her eyes widened a fraction, but Oscar didn't recognize the fleeting emotion that flashed across them. She only looked down immediately, her eyelashes casting shadows and covering the dark abyss that was her eyes.

She sighed. "Very well, then. I suppose I should be glad you didn't ask me to marry you. I'll train you for three months. However, I make no guarantee that you'll be able to beat me at the end of that time."

"That's fine with me. I'll do my best," he replied instantly, making a very adult-looking smile spread across her face. That smile captivated Oscar. He couldn't help but ask the question that had occurred to him. "Did someone ask you to marry them before?"

"The world would be a much more peaceful place without the existence of someone so foolish."

"Didn't you say you'd marry anyone who was stronger than you?"

"I most certainly did not!" she exclaimed, denying it vehemently. Evidently, she didn't recall her conversation with the children fifteen years ago.

The pair's height difference was totally flipped, and Tinasha looked up at Oscar with the eyes of a wary cat. "So you came to my tower to get stronger?"

"If anything, I came here to thank you."

Also, to make sure the witch wasn't feeling too lonely.

They could talk later about his desire to spend his life with her.

Tinasha stared at him before pursing her lips in a pout. "You're an odd man."

"Am I?"

"You shouldn't let your guard down around a witch. They all have their quirks, and each is terrible in her own way."

"I will bear that in mind."

The sight of her shaking her head at him gave Oscar a flash of familiarity. He frowned.

The hazy memory faded before it could take a precise shape.

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The clanging of swords filled the air. But the intervals between each collision came much further apart than was the case with Oscar's usual speed. His opponent was the witch who lived in this tower. She snapped the fingers of her left hand as she wielded a thin practice sword with the other.

In response, Oscar leaped back. An invisible blade passed in front of his face.

“Correct,” she said, smiling over at him. She snapped her fingers again.

This time, instead of falling back, Oscar moved in toward her. Her dark eyes grew wide. As he brought his sword down on her, she giggled. “You’re getting it.”

The faint praise didn’t make Oscar drop his guard. The witch’s sword met his.

Right after a metallic clang, he felt something bump against the back of his head. When he stumbled forward, Tinasha snapped her fingers again. Quickly, he dodged to the left—but a gust of wind caught his feet. As he lost his balance, he heard the witch say disappointedly, “Magic that you dodge once will loop back around. Since you can’t see it, it means you really are dodging based on pure intuition.”

“I honestly don’t get it myself, but that seems to be the case.”

Tinasha’s drills had begun one week prior. Oscar came to the tower and trained with her every day. At the moment, they were doing a practice exercise on guarding against magic.

As they exchanged blows, Tinasha sent out occasional blasts of invisible magic. She signaled this with snaps of her fingers, but she didn’t send out an attack every time she made the gesture. She wanted Oscar to quickly discern whether there was magic flying toward him or not and act accordingly.

Presently, Oscar was managing around 80 percent of the attacks successfully on intuition alone, but the witch was dissatisfied with that. “You lost against me because you can’t detect invisible spells. You have magic, but no sight for it, which needs to be rectified. It’s a huge problem. Why didn’t anyone train you when you were younger? Isn’t your mother a mage?”

“She instructed me on the basics, but I couldn’t get the hang of it, and she gave up. She told me that a royal of Farsas is a swordsman first and foremost, so that should be the part to focus on.”

“Ooh, so she abandoned it because you weren’t cut out to be a mage… But if you don’t master the art of magical sight, you’ll never get past opponents of a certain level. Like me, for instance.”

“Hey, don’t sell yourself short. I’d say the strongest of all the witches counts for more than just a ‘certain level.’” Oscar retorted.

However, his wish was to win against Tinasha. Even with Akashia, he wasn’t going to make up for the difference in their skill levels in a scant three months. Oscar realized that he really should have done more training in spellwork when he was a boy.

As if sensing his thoughts, Tinasha said, “But I think it’s much better how you are now, instead of being half-trained as a mage and half-trained as a swordsman. To be perfectly honest, you’re among the top five strongest swordsmen I’ve seen in the past few centuries.”

“That actually makes me pretty happy to hear.”

“Which is why you need magical sight, whether we have to force it on you or not. In the worst case, I could remove one of your eyes and replace it with a magical one.”

“I really cannot believe you just proposed that with a straight face,” Oscar muttered. It was never long before her witchy demeanor revealed itself. But at heart, she was a good person who was very caring about others. He’d learned that much over the past week they had spent together. She also would never have rescued him if she weren’t like that.

Tinasha vanished the sword in her hand and stared up at him. “But your eyes are such a pretty color that removing one would be a waste.”

“I’ll…work on mastering that magical sight as soon as possible.”

“Good, you’re a diligent student. We’ll pick this up again tomorrow,” the witch said, and she turned to go.

That made Oscar remember something he needed to tell her. “Sorry, but can you excuse me from tomorrow? I have to go investigate a magical lake.”

“A magical lake?” she repeated, her dark eyes narrowing.

It may have been Oscar’s imagination, but he thought the air around the witch grew chilly.

“Where is there a magical lake?” Tinasha questioned.

“In northern Farsas. It’s the place where you once fought against a demonic beast.”

On that site, seventy years ago, Oscar’s great-grandfather had battled alongside Tinasha after signing a contract with her.

A frown marred the witch’s lovely features. “Why are you going to investigate it now?”

“One of our mages makes regular research trips to the lake, and he was just attacked by some mages of unknown affiliation while out there. He survived, but we have to track down those other mages, so I’m going to go and check it out.”

“I’ll go.”

“What?” Oscar replied with some shock.

Tinasha stared at the floor, a cold look in her eyes. “I’ll look into it. You return to the castle. Don’t worry; I’ll handle this.”

Her words implied that Oscar shouldn’t pry, while her lovely gaze was as ice.

It was the first time he’d seen her like that. Everything about her expression was dark and shuttered, a yawning shadow passing across her face. That shadow struck fear into all who witnessed it, convincing him anew that she really was a witch who had lived for eons. But that wasn’t all he noticed.

“I’m going, too,” Oscar declared.

“Excuse me?”

“I planned to investigate. If you intend to come, then we’ll go together. Sounds perfect, actually.”

“Why?!” Tinasha screeched, her voice breaking. Now she was back to her usual self. She stared up at Oscar like she couldn’t believe how stupid he was. “Why would the crown prince go on an expedition outside the country? Let me handle this.”

“But isn’t that the place where a witch sealed away a demonic beast? I don’t think it’s dead, so it’s pretty dangerous.”

“I’m perfectly aware of that! *I’m* the one who sealed it, you know!”

The Witch of the Azure Moon had locked away a demonic beast deep underneath a magical lake seventy years ago, where it still slept. The monthly inspections Farsas conducted ensured that was still true.

Oscar asked something he’d been wondering since childhood. “Did you seal it away because you couldn’t defeat it?”

“No, I can. It’s just that its magical resistance is so high, and it’s so massive that I’d need to use incredibly potent and far-ranging magic to do so. Back then, that area was heavily populated. There was a chance that the local citizens would die if I exercised that much power, so I decided against it.”

Oscar nodded. “Ah, I see.” To a witch, the existence of regular people was nothing more than a hindrance. He went on to ask, “Do you think the beast could be revived?”

“Well…who knows?” Tinasha muttered, that same shadow flitting across her gaze again. She combed her long hair with a hand. “If, by some chance, the seal *has* been undone, then you can ask me to rewrite our contract and request that I kill the beast.”

She gazed up at him, eyes full and round. Oscar had bested the witch’s tower and signed a contract with her. For his wish, he’d asked her to train him, and now she was offering to alter that deal to request she kill the demonic beast.

However, that would probably mean that she would no longer give him lessons. Too stunned by the implications to speak, Oscar stood there while the witch flashed him a sharp, poisonous grin. “What’s the matter? You don’t want to use the hard-won privilege you acquired all on your own to protect your country?”

“No, that’s not it at all. If you’re the only one who can kill this monster, it makes sense to ask you to,” he replied immediately.

Tinasha’s eyes widened.

It was only natural that Oscar would put his country first. He’d never manipulate his choice for selfish reasons.

“Besides, I’d only need to climb the tower again,” he added.

“Do you think that’s allowed?!”

“It isn’t written anywhere that it’s limited to one time. Anyone who climbs the tower earns the right to one wish. Isn’t that how it goes?”

“Yes, but I made it so difficult that no one in their right mind would *want* to climb it a second time!”

“How about I start now and give it another go?”

“That would be completely uncalled for! It’s hard work cleaning up each floor! You need to go back home! Now!” she shouted, pointing to a spot on the ground floor inscribed with a transportation array that led back to Oscar’s chambers in Farsas Castle. Every day, he used that spell to come to the tower for training, but if he angered Tinasha too much, she might erase it.

Oscar regained control of himself and got back on track. “Putting aside my hard-won privilege, it’s my mage who got attacked at the magical lake. I have a duty to investigate.”

“Fine. Do what you want,” Tinasha snapped, evidently not in the mood to discuss the matter further.

Every so often, she would draw a hard boundary between them that kept Oscar from coming any closer, and this was one of those times. She probably did it for the same reason she lived alone at the top of a tower full of impassable trials and traps. The witch lived like solitude was a natural part of her life. Whenever Oscar caught a glimpse of this side of her, he was beset by an emotion he couldn’t identify. He felt an urgent need to take her by the hand for no reason he could remember.

As he stared at her, he remembered something else. “Oh yeah, we have the Festival of Aetea coming up in Farsas.”

“Is it that time of year already? Do you want to cut back on your training because you’ll be busy?”

“No, I wanted to invite you to visit the celebration. I’ll show you around.”

“What? You’d really do that?” Tinasha asked, face lighting up like a little girl’s. Oscar hadn’t expected that manner of response. She seemed an entirely different person.

Squealing happily like the teenage girl she outwardly resembled, Tinasha gushed, “I’ve actually never attended the Festival of Aetea before. Oh, I’m so excited!”

That smile transformed the light in the witch’s eyes, granting Oscar an entirely new impression of her. She was like a jewel that glittered in different ways, depending on the angle of the light refracted through it.

Oscar laughed at how the witch was behaving like someone younger than he was now.

Instantly, Tinasha frowned suspiciously at him. “What’s so funny? I truly don’t understand you.”

“I feel the exact same way about you.”

“You were much cuter when you were five… Can I turn your body back to that age?”

“Absolutely not…”

Oscar wanted to take her by the hand, not revert to a child and have her lead him by his.

If possible, he wanted to get strong enough to win against her and to save her whenever she needed help. He’d already expressed his gratitude to her for the rescue. Now he desired to forge a relationship of equals between

them. It seemed like a long way off, but it was still his goal. He aimed to reach it by the end of the next three months.

Oscar's smile grew strained as he glanced down at the witch. "To you, I bet I seem totally inexperienced. However, I plan to show you that the time you're putting in with me has yielded solid results. Believe me, I know I'm asking for a lot here. At least let me show you around the festival."

"I mean…you *did* beat the tower. You've earned the right," Tinasha muttered, glancing away a bit awkwardly. Perhaps she felt guilty for treating Oscar like a kid, when he took his training so seriously.

Looking to the transportation array, Tinasha said, "If you can see magic in five days, I'll take you with me when I inspect the magical lake."

"Tinasha…"

"So you'd better be here at the tower for practice tomorrow. Until we go, I'll have my familiar stand guard at the lake."

She glanced over her shoulder at him and smiled with the eyes of a young girl who'd known many losses. "You're doing wonderfully."

Her words were clear and imbued with kindness, speaking to the core of who she was as a person.

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In the end, it took Oscar half a year to win against her.

Because small incidents kept cropping up, Tinasha relaxed the three-month end point she had set at the beginning. She defeated the unsealed demonic beast, cleared her mind of the delusions about her homeland she'd labored under for the past four hundred years, and somewhere along the way, it became natural for her and Oscar to be together.

At the half-year mark, they had a mock battle, and Tinasha lost. She was a little down about it, but she still seemed pleased.

Oscar proposed marriage to her: "Because I won, after all."

She was concerned: "Did you…hit your head?"

He confessed: "All these years, I've never been able to forget about you."

She frowned at him: "You're crazy."

"When I found out about your tower, I knew I had to climb it—and talk to you."

"That isn't normally why people climb my tower."

"I didn't know what to think when you acted so upset after I finally managed to see you again."

"It's because you kept worming your way into my life."

At the moment, she was sprawled on the ceiling reading a book, like some big cat who had happily taken up residence in the castle. She hadn't accepted his proposal yet, despite making herself entirely at home. Apparently, she was still continuously bothered by him.

However, the more time they spent together, the more it seemed like it might last a lifetime…just like the silly dream he'd had.

It didn’t matter that neither recalled any memories from their final lifetimes as mortals.

Because when they met down in the cavern, it fulfilled the promise she made to find him, no matter when in time.

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